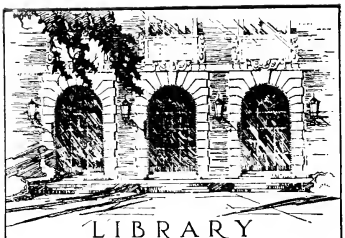

N Whittaker

THE TENTS OF SHEM

A Novel

BY

GRANT ALLEN

AUTHOR OF

'BABYLON,' 'THE DEVIL'S DIE,' 'THIS MORTAL COIL,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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TO

M. M. S.,

IN MEMORY OF MANY HAPPY DAYS

AT SIDI SALAH.

CONTENTS OF VOL. I.

THE TENTS OF SHEM.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE DARK CONTINENT.

Two young men of most Britannic aspect sat lounging together in long wicker chairs on the balcony of the English club at Algiers. They had much reason. It was one of those glorious days, by no means rare, when the sky and climate of the city on the Sahel reach absolute perfection. The wistaria was draping the parapet of the balcony with its profuse tresses of rich amethyst blossom; the long and sweeping semicircle of the bay gleamed like a peacock's neck in hue, or a brilliant opal with its changeful iridescence; and the snow-

clad peaks of the Djurjura in the background rose high in the air, glistening white and pink in the reflected glory of the afternoon sun. But the two young men of Britannic aspect, gazing grimly in front of them, made no comment to one another on the beauty and variety of that basking scene. How could they, indeed? They had not been introduced to one another! To admire nature, however obtrusive, in company with a man to whom you have not been introduced is a social solecism. So they sat and lounged, and stroked their moustaches reflectively, and looked at the palm-trees, and the orange-groves, and the white Moorish villas that stud the steep, smiling slopes of Mustapha Supérieur, in the solemn silence of the true-born Englishman.

They might have sat there for ever and said nothing (in which case the world must certainly have lost the present narrative) had not the felt presence of a Common Want

impelled them at last spasmodically to a conversational effort.

'I beg your pardon, but do you happen to have a light about you?' the elder of the two said, in an apologetic voice, drawing a cigar, as he spoke, from the neat little morocco case in his pocket.

'Curious, but I was just going to ask you the very same thing,' his younger companion answered, with a bashful smile. 'I've finished my last vesuvian. Suppose we go into the smoking-room and look for a match. Can you tell me where, in this abode of luxury, the smoking-room finds itself?'

'Why, I haven't yet investigated the question,' the other replied, rising from his seat as he spoke; 'but I'm open to conviction. Let's go and see. My trade's exploring.'

'Then I take it for granted you're a newcomer, like myself, as you don't know your way about the club-rooms yet?'

'You put your finger plump on the very

point,' the elder answered, opening a door on the left in search of the common need. 'The fact is, I arrived in Algiers only yesterday evening.'

'Another coincidence! Precisely my case. I crossed by last night's boat from Marseilles. Ah, here's the smoking-room! May I offer you a light? P'f, p'f, p'f. Thanks, that'll do very well, I think. . . . And how do you feel to-day, after that terrible journey?'

The elder Briton smiled a somewhat grim and restrained smile. He was tall and fair, but much bronzed with the sun.

'Never had such a tossing in all my life before,' he answered quietly. 'A horrid voyage. Swaying to and fro from side to side till I thought I should fall off, and be lost to humanity. Talk of the good ship plunging on the sea, indeed, as Theo Marzials does in that rollicking song of his; any other ship I ever sailed on's the merest trifle to it.'

'And when did you leave England?' his companion went on, with a polite desire, commendable in youth, to keep up the successfully-inaugurated conversation. 'You weren't on the *Abd-el-Kader* with us from Marseilles, on Tuesday?'

'When did I leave England?' the new acquaintance answered, with a faint twinkle in his eye, amused at the chance of a momentary mystification. 'I left England last October, and I've been ever since getting to Algiers. *Per varios casus, per tot discrimina rerum.*'

'Goodness gracious! By what route?' the youth with the dark moustache inquired, distrusting the Latin, and vaguely suspecting some wily attempt to practise upon his tender years and credulity.

'By the land-route from Tunis, back of the desert, *viâ* Biskra and Laghouat.'

'But I thought you said you'd had such an awful tossing!'

'So I did. Never felt such a tossing in

the world before. But it wasn't the sea; it was the ship of the desert. I came here —as far as Blidah, at least—true Arab-wise, see-saw, on camel-back.'

The dark young man puffed away at his weed for a moment vigorously, in deep contemplation. He was a shy person who didn't like to be taken in; and he strongly suspected his new acquaintance of a desire to humbug him.

'What were you doing?' he asked, at last, in a more constrained voice, after a short pause.

'Picking flowers,' was the curt and unexpected answer.

'Oh, come now, you know,' the dark young man expostulated, with a more certain tone, for he felt he was being hoaxed. 'A fellow doesn't go all the way to the desert, of all places in the world, just for nothing else but to pick flowers.'

'Excuse me, a fellow does, if he happens to be a fellow in the flower and beetle

business, which is exactly my own humble but useful avocation.'

'Why, surely, there aren't any flowers there. Nothing but sand, and sunset, and skeletons.'

'Pardon me. I've been there to see. Allow me to show you. I'll just go and fetch that portfolio over there.' And he opened it in the sunlight. 'Here are a few little water-colour sketches of my desert acquaintances.'

The dark young man glanced at them with some languid curiosity. An artist by trade himself, here at least he knew his ground. He quaked and trembled before no dawdling amateur. Turning over the first two or three sheets attentively:

'Well, you can draw,' he said at last, after a brief scrutiny. 'I don't know whether flowers like those grow in the desert or not—I should rather bet on *not*, of the two—but I'm a painter myself, and I know at any rate you can paint them excellently, as amateurs go.'

'My one accomplishment,' the explorer answered, with a pleased expansion of the corners of his mouth; it is human to receive approbation gratefully from those who know. 'I couldn't sketch a scene or draw a figure with tolerable accuracy to save my life; but I understand the birds, and creeping things, and flowers; and sympathy, I suppose, makes me draw them, at least, sympathetically.'

'Precisely so. That's the very word,' the artist went on, examining each drawing he turned over with more and more care. 'Though your *technique's* amateurish, of course, I can see you know the flowers, their tricks and their manners, down to the very ground. But tell me now: do these things really grow in the desert?'

'On the oases, yes. The flowers there are quite brilliant and abundant. Like the Alpine flora, they seem to grow loveliest near their furthest limit. Butterfly-fertilized. But what brings you to Algeria so late in the season? All the rest of the world is

turning its back now upon Africa, and hurrying away to Aix-les-Bains, and Biarritz, and Switzerland, and England. You and I will be the only people, bar Arabs and Frenchmen (who don't count), left here for the summer.'

'What, are *you* going to stop the summer here too?'

'Well, not in Algiers itself,' the explorer answered, flicking his boot with his cane for an imaginary dust-spot. 'I've been baked enough in the desert for the last six months to cook a turtle, and I'm going over yonder now, where ices grow free, for coolness and refreshment.'

And he waved his hand with a sweep across the sapphire semicircle of the glassy bay, to the great white block of rearing mountains that rose with their sheet of virgin snow against the profound azure of an African sky in the far background.

'What, to Kabylie!' the artist exclaimed, with a start of surprise.

'To Kabylie—yes. The very place. You've learnt its name and its fame already, then?'

'Why, I see in this the finger of Fate,' the artist answered, with more easy confidence. 'We have here, in fact, a third coincidence. It's in Kabylie that I, too, have decided on spending the summer. Perhaps, as you seem to know the way, we might manage to start on our tour together.'

'But what are you going for?' the elder man continued, with an amused air.

'Oh, just to paint. Nothing more than that. The country and the people; new ground for the exhibitions. Spain's used up: so some fellows in England who know the markets advised me to go to Kabylie on an artistic exploring expedition. From our point of view, you see, it's unbroken ground, they say, or almost unbroken; and everything civilized has been so painted up, and painted down, and painted round about, of

late years, by everyone everywhere, that one's glad to get a hint of the chance of finding some unhackneyed subject in a corner of Africa. Besides, they tell me it's all extremely naïve; and I like *naïveté.* That's my line in art. I'm in quest of the unsophisticated. I paint simplicity.'

'You'll find your sitter in Kabylie, then: *naïveté* rampant, and simplicity with a vengeance,' the explorer answered. 'It's quite untouched and unvulgarized as yet by any taint or tinge of Parisian civilization. The aboriginal Kabyle hasn't even learnt the A B C of French culture—to sit at an *estaminet* and play dominoes.'

'So much the better. That's just what I want. Unvarnished man. The antique vase in real life. And I'm told the costumes are almost Greek in their naturalness.'

'Quite Greek, or even more so,' the explorer replied; 'though, perhaps, considering its extreme simplicity, we ought rather

to say, even less so. But where do you mean to stop, and how to travel? Accommodation in Ancient Greece, you know, wasn't really luxurious.'

'Oh, I'll just set out from Algiers by diligence, I suppose, and put up for a while at some little hotel in the country villages.'

The explorer's face could not resist a gentle smile of suppressed merriment.

'An hotel, my dear sir!' he said with surprise. 'An hotel in Kabylie! You'll find it difficult, I'm afraid, to meet with the article. Except at Fort National, which is a purely French settlement, where you could study only the common or French Zouave engaged in his familiar avocation of playing bowls and sipping absinthe, there's not such a thing as a cabaret, a lodging, a wayside inn, in the whole block of mountain country. Strangers who want to explore Kabylie may go if they like to the house of the village headman, the *amine*, as they call

him, where you may sup off a nasty mess of pounded *kous-kous*, and sleep at night on a sort of shelf or ledge among the goats and the cattle. Government compels every *amine* to provide one night's board and entertainment for any European traveller who cares to demand it. But the entertainment provided is usually so very varied and so very lively that those who have tried it once report on it unfavourably. *Verbum sap.* It's too entomological. When you go to Kabylie, *don't* do as the Kabyles do.'

'But how do you mean to manage yourself?' the artist asked, with the prudence of youth. He was nettled at having made so stupid a mistake at the very outset about the resources of the mountains, and not quite certain that he grasped the meaning of *verbum sap.* (his Latin being strictly a negative quantity), so he took refuge in the safe device of a question that turned the tables. 'I came to Algiers hoping to pick

up some information as to ways and means as soon as I got here; and since you seem to know the ropes so well, perhaps you'll give a raw hand the benefit of your riper experience.'

'Oh, *I* have my tent,' the traveller answered, with the quiet air of a man who has made his way alone about the world. 'It's a first-rate tent for camping-out in; it's supplied with the electric light, a hydraulic lift, hot water laid on, and all the latest modern improvements — metaphorically speaking,' he hastened to add by an after-thought, for he saw his companion's large gray eyes opening wider and wider with astonishment each moment. 'It's awfully comfortable, you know, as deserts go; and I could easily rig up a spare bed; so if you really mean to paint in Kabylie, and will bear a share in the expenses of carriage, it might suit both our books, perhaps, if you were to engage my furnished apartments. For I'm not overburdened with

spare cash myself—no naturalist ever is—and I'm by no means above taking in a lodger, if any eligible person presents himself at the tent with good references and an unblemished character. Money not so much an object as congenial society in a respectable family.

It was a kind offer, playfully veiled under the cloak of mutual accommodation, and the painter took it at once as it was meant. 'How very good of you!' he said. 'I'm immensely obliged. Nothing on earth would suit my plans better, if it wouldn't be trespassing too much on your kind hospitality.'

'Not at all,' the explorer answered with a good-humoured nod. 'Don't mention that. To say the truth, I shall be glad of a companion. The Arab palls after a month or two of his polite society. And I love Art, too, though I don't pretend myself to understand it. We'll talk the matter over a little, as to business arrangements, over a

cup of coffee, and I dare say, when we've compared notes, we shall manage to hit things off comfortably together.'

'May we exchange cards?' the artist asked, pulling out a silver-bound case from his breast-pocket, and handing one of its little regulation pasteboards to his new friend.

The explorer glanced at it, and read the name, 'Vernon Blake, Gresholm Road, Guildford.'

'I've no card of my own,' he made answer, as he pocketed it; 'in the desert, you see, cards were of very little use; Bedouins don't drop them on one another. But my name's Le Marchant — Eustace Le Marchant, of Jersey, beetle-sticker.'

'Oh, but I know your name,' Blake cried eagerly, delighted to show himself not wholly ignorant of a distinguished naturalist. 'You're an F.R.S., aren't you? Ah, yes, I thought so. I've seen notices of you often in the paper, I'm sure, as having gone somewhere and found out something.

Do you know, if I'd only known that before, I think I should have been afraid to accept your kind offer. I'm an awfully ignorant sort of a fellow myself—far too ignorant to go camping-out with an F.R.S. in the wilds of Africa.'

'If being an F.R.S. is the worst crime you can bring to my charge,' Le Marchant answered with a smile, 'I dare say we shall pull together all very well. And if you meet no worse society than F.R.S.'s in the wilds of Africa, though it's me that says it, as oughtn't to say it, your luck will have been very exceptional indeed. But I don't think you need be much afraid of me. I'm an F.R.S. of the mildest type. I never call anything by its longest and ugliest Latin name: I never bore other people with interesting details of anatomical structure: I never cut up anything alive (bar oysters), and I never lecture, publicly or privately, to anybody, anywhere, on any consideration. There are two kinds of naturalists, you

know : and I'm one of the wrong kind. The superior class live in London or Paris, examine everything minutely with a great big microscope, tack on inches of Greek nomenclature to an insignificant mite or bit of moss, and split hairs against anybody with marvellous dexterity. That's science. It dwells in a museum. For my part, I detest it. The inferior class live in Europe, Asia, Africa, or America, as fate or fancy carries ; and, instead of looking at everything in a dried specimen, go out into the wild woods with rifle on shoulder, or box in hand, and observe the birds, and beasts, and green things of the earth, as God made them, in their own natural and lovely surroundings. That's natural history, old-fashioned, simple, commonplace natural history ; and I, for my part, am an old-fashioned naturalist. I've been all winter watching the sandy-gray creatures on the sandy-gray desert, preparing for my great work on " Structure and Function," and

now, through the summer, I want to correct and correlate my results by observing the plants and animals and insects of the mountains in Kabylie. To tell you the truth, I think I shall like you—for I, too, have a taste for simplicity. If you come with me, I can promise you sport and healthy fare, and make you comfortable in my furnished apartments. Let's descend to details—for this is business—and we must understand exactly what each of us wants before either of us binds himself down formally for five months to the other. Alphonse, a couple of coffees and two *petits verres* at once, here, will you ?'

And by the clarifying aid of a cigar and a *chasse-café*, it was finally decided, before the evening sun flushed the Djurjura purple, and turned the white Arab walls to pink, that Vernon Blake should accompany Eustace Le Marchant, on almost nominal terms as to the sharing of expenses, on his summer trip to the mountains of Grande Kabylie.

CHAPTER II.

HONOURS.

SOMEWHERE about the same time, away over in England, Iris Knyvett sat one morning at lunch, drumming with her fingers on the table before her that particular tattoo which the wisdom of our ancestors ascribed to the author of all evil.

Iris Knyvett herself would, no doubt, have been very much astonished if only she could have been told by some prescient visitor that her own fate was in any way bound up with the proposed expedition of two unknown young men, from the English Club at Algiers, into the wilds of Kabylie. She had hardly heard (save in the catalogue of the Institute) the name of Vernon

Blake; while Eustace Le Marchant's masterly papers before the Linnean Society, on the Longicorn Beetles of the Spice Islands, had never roused her girlish enthusiasm, or quickened her soul to a fiery thirst for the study of entomology. And yet, if she had but known it, Iris Knyvett's whole future in life depended utterly, as so often happens with everyone of us, on the casual encounter of those two perfect strangers among the green recesses of the North African mountains.

In absolute ignorance of which profound truth, Iris Knyvett herself went on drumming with her fingers impatiently on the table, and leaving the filleted sole on her plate to grow cold, unheeded, in the cool shade of a fair lady's neglect.

'Iris, my dear,' Mrs. Knyvett said sharply. with a dry cough, 'why don't you eat your lunch? Your appetite's frightful. What makes you go on hammering away at that dreadful tattoo so?'

Iris's eyes came back with a bound from a point in space lying apparently several thousand miles behind the eminently conventional Venetian scene that hangs above the sideboard in every gentleman's dining-room. 'I can't eat anything, I really think, mamma,' she said with a slight sigh, 'till I've had that telegram.'

Mrs. Knyvett helped herself to a second piece of filleted sole and its due proportion of anchovy sauce with great deliberation, before she answered slowly, 'Oh, so you're expecting a telegram!'

'Yes, mamma,' Iris replied with scarcely a shade of reasonable vexation on her pretty face. 'Don't you remember, dear, I told you my tutor promised to telegraph to me.'

'Your tutor! oh, did he?' Mrs. Knyvett went on with polite acquiescence, letting drop her *pince-nez* with a dexterous elevation of her arched eyebrows. The principal feature of Mrs. Knyvett's character, indeed, was a Roman nose of finely-developed

proportions ; but it was one of those insipid Roman noses which stand for birth alone—which impart neither dignity, firmness, nor strength to a face, but serve only to attest their owner's aristocratic antecedents. Mrs. Knyvett's was useful mainly to support her *pince-nez*, but as her father had been the Dean of a southern cathedral, it also managed incidentally to support the credit of her family. 'Oh, did he,' Mrs. Knyvett repeated after a pause, during which Iris continued to tattoo uninterruptedly. 'That was very kind of him.' Though why on earth, or concerning what, he should wish to telegraph, Mrs. Knyvett, who had never been told more than five hundred times before, had really not the slightest conception.

'Not *he*, mamma. You must surely remember I've reminded you over and over again that my tutor's name is Emily Vanrenen.'

'Then why does she sign herself "E. Van-

renen, B.A. and D.Sc.," I wonder?' Mrs. Knyvett went on with dreamy uncertainty. 'A Doctor of Science ought surely to be a man? And Bachelor of Arts, too—Bachelor of Arts! Bachelors and spinsters are getting too mixed, too mixed altogether.'

Iris was just going to answer something gently, as was her wont, in defence of the mixture, when a rap at the door made her jump up hastily. 'That must be the telegram!' she cried with a tremor, and darted off to the door in a vigorous dash that sufficiently showed her Girton training had at least not quite succeeded in crushing the life out of her.

'Iris, Iris!' her mother called after her in horror; 'let Jane answer the door, my dear. This unseemly procedure—and at lunch-time, too—is really quite unpardonable. In my time girls——'

But Iris was well out of hearing long since, and Mrs. Knyvett was forced to do penance vicariously herself on her daughter's

account to the offended fetish of the British drawing-room.

In another minute the bright young girl had come back crestfallen, ushering in before her a stout and rosy-faced middle-aged gentleman, also distinguished by a Roman nose to match, and dressed with the scrupulous and respectable neatness of the London barrister.

'It's only Uncle Tom,' she cried, disappointed.

'It's only Uncle Tom?' the stout, red-faced gentleman echoed good-humouredly. 'Well, for taking the conceit out of a man, I'll back the members of one's own family, and more especially and particularly one's prettiest and most favourite niece, against all comers, for a hundred pounds a side, even money. That's all the thanks I get, is it, Iris? for coming out of Court in the midst of a most important case, and leaving my junior, a thick-headed Scotchman as ever was born, to cross-examine the leading

witness for the other side, on purpose to ask you whether you've got a telegram: and "Only Uncle Tom" are the very first words my prettiest niece thinks fit to greet me with after all my devotion.'

And he stooped down as Iris seated herself at the table once more, and kissed her affectionately on her smooth white forehead.

'Oh, uncle!' Iris cried, blushing up to her pretty blue eyes with ingenuous distress at having even for a moment appeared to slight him—'I didn't mean that. You know I didn't mean it. I'm always pleased and delighted to see you. But the fact is I was expecting the telegram; and I ran to the door when you rat-tat-tatted, thinking it was the telegraph boy; and when I saw it was only you—I mean, when I saw it was you, of course—why, I was naturally disappointed not to have got the news about it all. But did you really come up all the way from Court on purpose to hear it, you dear old uncle?'

'All the way from Court, with Coleridge, C.J., smiling cynically at my best witnesses, I give you my word of honour, Iris,' the red-faced old gentleman answered, mollified; 'for nothing on earth except to hear about a certain pretty little niece of mine — because I knew the pretty little niece was so very anxious on the subject.'

'Oh, uncle, that *was* kind of you,' Iris cried aloud, flushing up to her eyes once more, this time with pleasure. A little sympathy went a long way with her. 'It's so good of you to take so much interest in me.'

'My unfortunate client won't say so,' Uncle Tom muttered half aloud to himself. And, indeed, the misguided persons who had retained and refreshed Thomas Kynnersley Whitmarsh, Q.C., the eminent authority on probate cases, would probably not have learned with unmixed pleasure this touching instance of his domestic affection.

'But what's it all about, dear Tom?' Mrs. Knyvett exclaimed, in a querulous tone and with a puzzled air. 'What do Iris and you want to get a telegram from this ambiguous tutor of hers for?'

Uncle Tom was just about to enlighten his sister's darkness (for the five hundred and first time), when poor Iris, unable to control her feelings any longer, rose from the table, with tears standing in her pretty blue eyes, and remarked, in a slightly husky voice, that she could eat nothing, and would go and wait for the telegram in the drawing-room.

Mrs. Knyvett looked after her, bewildered and amazed. 'This sort of thing makes girls very strange,' she said sapiently.

'This sort of thing' being that idol of our age, the Higher Education.

'Well, well, it's done *her* no harm, anyhow,' Uncle Tom answered, with stout good-humour, for his niece was a great favourite of his, in spite of her heresies. 'I

don't approve of all this fal-lal and nonsense myself, either; but Iris is a Knyvett, you see, and the Knyvetts always struck out a line for themselves; and each Knyvett strikes out a different one. She's struck out hers. She didn't get that from *us*, you may be sure. Nobody could ever accuse the Whitmarshes of eccentricity or originality. We get on, but we get on steadily. It's dogged that does it with our family, Amelia. The Knyvetts are different. They go their own way, and it's no good anybody else trying to stop them.'

'What would her poor dear father say to it all, I wonder?' Mrs. Knyvett remarked parenthetically, through a mist of sighs.

'He would say, "Let her go her own way,"' the eminent Q.C. replied with cheerful haste; 'and if it comes to that, whether he said it or not wouldn't much matter, for in her own quiet, peaceable, unobtrusive manner, offending nobody, Iris would go her own way, in spite of him. Yes, Amelia,

I say, in spite of him. After all, it's not been at all a bad thing, in some respects, that our dear girl should have taken up with this higher education fad. We don't approve of it; but, if it's done nothing else, it's kept her at least out of the way of the fortune-hunters.'

'Iris has great expectations,' Mrs. Knyvett remarked complacently. She remarked it, not because her brother was not already well aware of the fact, but because the thought was in her own mind, and she uttered it, as she uttered all other platitudes that happened to occur to her, in the full expectation that her hearer would find them as interesting as she did.

'Iris has great expectations!' her brother echoed. 'No doubt in the world, I think, about that. By the terms of the old Admiral's will, ridiculous as they are, I hardly imagine Sir Arthur would venture to leave the property otherwise. To do so would be risky, with me against him. And if Iris

had gone into London Society, and been thrown into the whirl of London life, instead of reading her "Odyssey" and her "Lucretius," and mugging up amusing works on conic sections, it's my belief some penniless beggar—an Irish adventurer, perhaps, if such a creature survives nowadays —would have fallen upon her and snapped her up long ago; especially before she came into her fortune. Then it seems to be almost disinterested. Now, this Cambridge scheme has saved us from all the trouble and bother of that sort of thing—it's ferried us across the most dangerous time—it's helped us to bridge over the thin ice, till Iris is a woman, and quite fit to take care of herself.'

'There's something in that,' Mrs. Knyvett responded, with a stately nod of the prominent feature. It seemed somehow to revolve independently on its own axis.

'*Something* in that!' her brother cried, amazed, as though his own 'devil' had

ventured to agree with him. 'There's a great deal in that, Amelia! There's everything in that! There's worlds in that! It's the "Iliad" in a nutshell. The girl's done the very best thing on earth for herself. She's saved her expectations—her great expectations—from the greedy maw of every eavesdropping London fortune-hunter.'

At that moment another rat-tat at the door made Uncle Tom start in his chair, and Iris's voice was heard upon the stairs as she rushed down from the drawing-room to the front-door in sudden trepidation. Endless terrors crowded upon her mind as she went. She was *quite* safe about her Latin prose, to be sure, but oh! that unspeakable, that terrible mistake in the unseen passage from Plato's 'Republic!' It would spoil all, that false second aorist! It *was* the telegram this time, sure enough, without further delay. Iris tore it open in an agony of suspense. Had the second

aorist betrayed her girlish trust? Had Plato repelled her platonic affections? Then her heart stopped beating for a moment, as she read the words:

'Cambridge University, Classical Tripos: Women. First Class, Iris Knyvett, Girton, bracketed equal, Third Classic. Sincerest congratulations. We are all so proud.

'Affectionately yours,

'E. VANRENEN.'

Oh, cruel century that has put such a strain upon a growing woman! Uncle Tom seized the half-fainting girl tenderly in his arms, and, wringing her hand a dozen times over, in spite of his disapproval of the higher education for women (which his present chronicler blushes to share), kissed her and congratulated her turn about in one unceasing tide for the next five minutes; while poor Iris's head, giddy with her triumph, swam round and round in a wild delirium of delight and amazement. Third Classic! In her highest mood of hope she

had never expected anything like this. She cried to herself silently in her joy and satisfaction.

'But what does it all mean?' Mrs. Knyvett exclaimed, adjusting the *pince-nez* on its pre-ordained stand once more with practised skill, and gazing vacantly from the telegram to Iris, and from Iris to the telegram. 'Is it—very much worse—much lower than she expected?'

'What does it all mean, ma'am?' Uncle Tom exclaimed, flinging prudence to the dogs and his cherished convictions to the four winds of heaven. 'What does it all mean? I like your question, indeed! Why it means just this—God bless my soul, how the girl trembles!—that your own daughter, Iris Knyvett, has beaten all the men but two in Cambridge University into a cocked hat. That's what it means, ma'am. That's what it means! I don't approve of it; but, upon my soul, I'm proud of her! Your daughter Iris is Third Classic.'

CHAPTER III.

BY MOORISH MOUNTAINS.

A WEEK later, preparations were complete. The tent had been arranged for mountain travelling; a folding-bed had been set up for the lodger's accommodation; stores had been laid in from that universal provider of Algerian necessities, Alexander Dunlop, in the Rue d'Isly; a Mahonnais Spaniard from the Balearic Isles had been secured as servant to guard the camp; and Blake and Le Marchant, on varying ends intent, had fairly started off for their tour of inspection through the peaks and passes of the Kabylian Highlands. The artist's kit included a large and select assortment of easels,

brushes, pigments, canvas, pencils, and Whatman's paper; the naturalist's embraced a good modern fowling-piece, an endless array of boxes for skins and specimens, and a fine collection of butterfly-nets, chloroform bottles, entomological pins, and materials for preserving birds, animals, and botanical treasures. Le Marchant, as the older and more experienced traveller, had charged himself with all the necessary arrangements as to packing and provisions; and when Blake looked on at the masterly way in which his new friend managed to make a couple of packing-cases and a cork-mattress do duty for a bedstead, at the same time that they contained, in their deep recesses, the needful creature comforts for a three months' tour among untrodden ways, he could not sufficiently congratulate himself upon the lucky chance which had thrown him, on the balcony of the Club at Algiers that particular afternoon, in company with so competent and so skilful an

explorer. He had fallen on his feet, indeed, without knowing it.

A lovely morning of bright African sunshine saw the two set forth in excellent spirits from the hotel at Tizi-Ouzou, the furthest French village in the direction of Kabylie, whither they had come the previous day by diligence from Algiers, to attack the mountains of the still barbaric and half-conquered Kabyles.

'Are the mules ready?' Le Marchant asked of the waiter at the little country inn where they had passed the night, as he swallowed down the last drop of his morning coffee.

'Monsieur,' the waiter answered, wiping his mouth with his greasy apron as he spoke, 'the Arabs say the mules will be at the door in half an hour.'

'The Arabs say!' Le Marchant repeated, with an impatient movement of his bronzed hand. 'In half an hour, indeed! The sloth of the Arab! I know these fellows.

That means ten o'clock, at the very earliest. It's now seven, and unless we get under way within twenty minutes, the sun 'll be so hot before we reach a resting-place, that we shall deliquesce like Miss Carolina Wilhelmina Amelia Skeggs in "The Vicar of Wakefield." I'll go out and hurry them up, Blake, with a little gentle moral suasion.'

Blake followed his host curiously to the door, where half a dozen ragged Orientals, picturesquely clad in a costume about equally divided between burnoose and dirt, were sprawling at their ease on a heap of soft dust in the full front of the morning sunshine.

'Get up, my friends,' Le Marchant cried aloud in excellent Arabic, for he was a born linguist. 'If the mules are not ready in five minutes by the watch I hold in my hand, by the beard of the Prophet, I solemnly tell you, you may go every man to his own home without a sou, and I will hire other mules, with the blessing of Allah,

from better men than you are to take us on our journey.'

Blake did not entirely understand colloquial Arabic when rapidly spoken—in fact, his own linguistic studies stopped short suddenly at his mother tongue, and so much French in the Ollendorffian dialect as enabled him to state fluently that the gardener's son had given his apple to the daughter of the carpenter—but he was greatly amused to see the instantaneous effect which this single sonorous sentence, rolled quietly but very firmly out in distinct tones, produced upon the nerves of the sprawling Arabs. They rose from the dust-heap as if by magic. In a moment all was bustle, and turmoil, and confusion. The tent and beds were hastily laden with infinite shrieks on the patient mules: boxes were strapped on—with many strange cords and loud cries of 'Arri!'—to the backs of donkeys; arms and legs were flung wildly about in multitudinous gesticulations of

despair and inability: and before the five minutes were fairly over by that inexorable watch which Le Marchant held with stern resolve before him, the little cavalcade started off at a trot in the direction of the still snow-clad summits of the nearer Djurjura.

It was a quaint small caravan, as it mounted the hillside. The two Englishmen rode unburdened mules ; the ragged Arabs, barefoot and melting, ran after them with shouts of guttural depth, and encouraged the pack-beasts with loud jerky remonstrances—' Oh, father of fools, and son of a jackass, will you not get up and hurry yourself more quickly ?'

' Where are we going ?' Blake asked at last, as the highroad that had conducted them for a mile from Tizi-Ouzou dwindled down abruptly near a steep slope to a mere aboriginal Kabyle mule-track, beset with stones, and overhung by thickets of prickly cactus.

'How should I know?' the naturalist answered, with a vague wave of the hand. 'We're going to Kabylie. That's enough for the moment. When we get there, we'll look about for a suitable spot, and pitch our tent wherever there's a patch of smooth enough ground for a man to pitch on. "Sufficient unto the day" is the explorer's motto. Your true traveller never decides anything beforehand. He goes where fate and fortune lead him. What we both want is to explore the unknown. We'll make our headquarters within its border, wherever we find a convenient resting-place.'

'Are the Kabyles black?' Blake ventured to ask, with a sidelong look, unburdening his soul of a secret doubt that had long possessed it.

'Oh dear no, scarcely even brown,' Le Marchant answered. 'They're most of them every bit as white as you and I are. They're the old aboriginal Romanised population—

the Berbers, in fact—driven up into the hills by the Arab invasion in the seventh century. Practically speaking, you know, Jugurtha and Masinissa and Juba were Kabyles.'

Blake had never heard of these gentlemen's names before; but he veiled his ignorance with an acquiescent 'Really!'

They rode on, talking of many things and various, for two or three hours, under the brilliant sunshine. But all the way as they rode they were mounting steadily, by devious native tracks, steep and picturesque, just broad enough for two mules to mount abreast, and opening out at every step magnificent views over the surrounding country. To right and left stood several white villages perched on spurs of the mountain-tops, with their olive groves, and tombs, and tiny domed mosques; while below lay wooded gorges of torrent streams, overhung and draped by rich festoons of great African clematis. Blake had never travelled in the

South before, and his artist eye was charmed at each turn by such novel beauties of the Southern scenery.

'This is glorious!' he cried at last, halting his mule at a sudden bend of the track. 'I shall do wonders here. I feel the surroundings exactly suit me. What could be more lovely than this luxuriant vegetation? I understand now those lines of Tennyson's in the "Daisy." So rich! So luscious! And look, up there on the mountain-side, that beautiful little mosque with its round white dome, embowered in its thicket of orange-trees and fan-palms! It's a dream of delight. It almost makes a man drop into poetry!'

'Yes, it's beautiful, certainly—very, very beautiful,' Le Marchant replied, in a soberer voice, glancing up meditatively. 'You never get mountain masses shaped like these in the cold North; those steep scarped precipices and jagged pinnacles would be quite impossible in countries ground flat and

worn into shape by the gigantic mangle of the Great Ice Age.'

'The great what?' Blake asked, with a faint tingling sense of doubt and shame. He was afraid of his life Le Marchant was going to be horribly scientific.

'The Great Ice Age—the glacial epoch, you know; the period of universal glacier development, which planed and shaved all the mountain heights in Northern Europe to a common dead-level.'

'I never heard of it,' Blake answered, shaking his head, with a blush, but thinking it best at the same time to make a clean breast of his ignorance at one fell swoop. 'I . . . I don't think it was mentioned in my history of England. I'm such a duffer at books, you know. To tell you the truth, I understand very little, except perspective. I've read nothing but the English poets; and those I've got at my finger-ends; but I don't remember anything in Milton or Shelley about the Great Ice Age. My father,

you see, was a painter before me ; and as I began to show a—well, a disposition for painting very early, he took me away from school when I was quite a little chap, and put me into his own studio, and let me pick up what I could by the way ; so I've never had any general education at all to speak of. But I admire learning—in other fellows. I always like to hear clever men talk together.'

'The best of all educations is the one you pick up,' Le Marchant answered kindly. 'Those of us who have been to schools and universities generally look back upon our wasted time there as the worst-spent part of all our lives. You're crammed there with rubbish you have afterwards to discard in favour of such realities as those you mention —perspective, for example, and English literature.'

As he spoke, they turned sharply down to a rushing brook by a Kabyle village, where two or three tall and lissome native

girls, fair as Italians, or even as English-women, in their simple and picturesque Oriental costume, were washing clothes at a tiny ford, and laughing and talking merrily with one another as they bent over their work. The scene irresistibly attracted Blake. The garb of the girls was, indeed, most Greek and graceful ; and their supple limbs and lithe natural attitudes might well arouse a painter's or a sculptor's interest.

'By Jove!' he cried. 'Le Marchant, I should like to sketch them. Anything so picturesque I never saw in my life before. "Sunburnt mirth," as Keats calls it in "The Nightingale." Just watch that girl stooping down to pound a cloth with a big round stone there. Why Phidias never imagined anything more graceful, more shapely, more exquisite!'

'She's splendid, certainly,' the naturalist answered, surveying the girl's pose with more measured commendation. 'A fine figure, I admit, well propped and vigorous.

No tight-lacing there. No deformity of fashion. The human form divine, in unspoiled beauty, as it came straight from the hands of its Creator.'

'Upon my word, Le Marchant,' the painter went on enthusiastically, 'I've half a mind to stop the caravan this very moment, undo the pack, unroll the papers, and get out my machinery on the spot to sketch her.'

Maturer years yielded less to the passing impulse of the moment.

'I wouldn't if I were you,' the naturalist answered more coolly. 'You'll see lots more of the same sort, no doubt, all through Kabylie. The species is probably well diffused. You can paint them by the score when we reach our resting-place.'

As Blake paused, irresolute, the girls looked up and laughed good-humouredly at the evident admiration of the two well-dressed and well-equipped young infidels. They were not veiled like Arab women: their faces and arms and necks were bare,

and their feet and ankles naked to the knee; for the old Berber population of North Africa, to whose race the Kabyles of Algeria belong, retain unchanged to this day their antique Roman freedom of manners and intercourse. The girls' features were all of them pretty, with a certain frank and barbaric boldness of outline. Though shy of strangers, they were clearly amused; the one who had attracted their special attention looked almost coquettishly across at Le Marchant, as he turned his beast with sterner resolve up the slope of the mountain.

'They're splendid creatures,' the naturalist said, looking back a little regretfully, while they rode up the opposite side, and left the brook and the girls for ever behind them. 'That sort of face certainly lives long in one's memory. I immensely admire these free children of nature. Just watch that girl coming down the hillside yonder now with her pitcher on her head—how gracefully she poses it! how lightly she trips!

What freedom, what ease, what untrammelled movement!'

'By George, yes,' Blake answered, taking in the scene with his quick artistic glance. 'It's glorious! It's splendid! From the purely æsthetic point of view, you know, these women are far better and finer in every way than the civilized product.'

'And why from the purely æsthetic point of view alone?' his companion asked quickly, with a shade of surprise. 'Why not also viewed as human beings in their concrete totality? Surely there's something extremely attractive to a sympathetic mind in the simplicity, the *naïveté*, the frank and unpretentious innate humanity of the barbaric woman.'

'Oh, hang it all, you know, Le Marchant!' the artist expostulated in a half-amused tone. 'They're all very well as models to sketch, but you can't expect a civilized man to be satisfied permanently—on any high ground—with such creatures as that, now.'

'I don't exactly see why not,' Le Marchant answered seriously, gazing down once more from the zigzag path on the laughing group of barefooted Kabyle girls, with their smooth round arms and their well-turned ankles. 'Humanity to me is always human. I've lived a great deal among many queer people —Malays and Arabs and Japanese, and so forth—and I've come in the end to the modest conclusion that man, as man, is everywhere man, and man only. Emotionally, at least, we are all of one blood all the world over.'

'But you couldn't conceive yourself marrying a Kabyle girl, could you?'

'As at present advised, I see no just cause or impediment to the contrary.'

Blake turned up his eyes to heaven for a moment in mute amazement.

'Well, I'm not built that way, anyhow,' he went on, after a pause, with a certain subdued sense of inward self-congratulation:

'"I, to herd with narrow foreheads, vacant of our glorious gains,
Like a beast with lower pleasures, like a beast with lower pains!"

No, thank you. For my part, I agree with the poet. I count the gray barbarian lower than the Christian child. None of your squalid savages for me. If ever I marry, which I hope I shall be able to do some of these fine days, the girl I marry must be at least my equal in intellect and attainments—and that, bar painting, she might easily manage in all conscience; but for choice, I should prefer her to be highly-educated—a Princess Ida sort of a woman.'

'Then, I take it, you admire these new-fashioned over-educated epicene creatures?' Le Marchant interposed, smiling.

'Well, not exactly over-educated, perhaps,' Blake answered apologetically (he was too much overawed to handle epicene); 'but, at any rate, I like them thorough ladies, and well brought up, and as clever as they make them.'

'Clever. Ah, yes! That's quite another thing. Cleverness is an underlying natural endowment; but crammed; no, thank you, not for me, at any rate!'

They paused for a moment, each pursuing his own line of thought unchecked; then the painter began again, in a musing voice: 'Did you happen to see in the English papers, before we left Algiers, that a Girton girl had just been made Third Classic at Cambridge?'

'I did,' Le Marchant answered, with a touch of pity in his tone; 'and I was heartily sorry for her.'

'Why sorry for her? It's a very great honour!'

'Because I think the strain of such a preparation too great to put upon any woman. Then that's the sort of girl you'd like to marry, is it?'

'Well, yes; other things equal, such as beauty and position, I'm inclined to think so. She must be pretty, of course, that goes

without saying—pretty, and graceful, and a lady, and all that sort of thing—one takes that for granted; but, given so much, I should like her also to be really well educated. You see, I've never had any education to speak of myself, so I should prefer my wife to have enough of that commodity on hand for both of us.'

'Quite so,' Le Marchant answered, with a faint smile. 'You'd consent to put up, in fact, with a perfect paragon, who was also a Girton girl and a Third Classic! I admire your modesty, and I hope you may get her.'

A fork in the road, with the practical necessity for deciding which of the two alternative tracks they should next take, put a limit for the moment to their conversation.

CHAPTER IV.

ENTER A HEROINE.

'WHICH way shall we go?' Blake asked, halting his mule for a second where the paths divided.

'I leave these questions always to the divine arbitrament of my patron goddess,' Le Marchant answered lightly, tossing a sou, and little knowing how much his future fate depended upon the final decision. 'Let chance decide. Heads, right! tails, left! The heads have it. Hi, you, Ahmed or Ali, or whatever your blessed name is,' he went on in Arabic, to the men behind, 'do you know where this path on the right leads to?'

'To the mountain of the Beni-Merzoug,

Excellency,' the ragged Arab nearest his mule made answer respectfully. 'It's a good village for you to stop at, as Allah decrees. The Beni-Merzoug are the most famous makers of jewellery and pottery among all the Kabyles.'

'That'll just suit our book, I say,' Le Marchant went on in English, translating the remark in the vernacular to Blake. 'Chance, as usual, has decided right. A wonderful goddess. To the Beni-Merzoug let it be at once, then.' And he pocketed the sou that had sealed his fortune. Oh, fateful sou, to be gilt hereafter in purest gold, and worn round fair lady's neck in a jewelled locket!

They mounted still, past rocky ledges, where hardly a goat could find a dubious foothold, but where Kabyle industry had nevertheless sown pathetic plots or strips of corn or cabbages—for is there not pathos in ineffective labour?—till they came at last, late in the afternoon, to a gray old

village, grimly perched on the summit of a minor mountain. 'These are the Beni-Merzoug,' the Arabs said, halting their mules in a line at the entry of the street. 'Here the track stops. We can go no further.'

'Let's look about for a spot to pitch our tent upon, then,' Le Marchant exclaimed, as they unloaded their burden. 'No easy job hereabouts, either, I should say. On the desert, one had always the embarrassment of riches in that respect; here, on these rugged rocky slopes, it would be hard to find ten square yards of level ground anywhere.'

Nevertheless, after a quarter of an hour's diligent search, not unembarrassed by the curiosity of the Kabyles as to the newcomers, a spot was found, close by the village headman's house, in the shadow of a pretty little white-domed tomb, overhung by ash-trees, from whose spreading boughs the wild vine drooped in graceful tresses.

It seemed to Blake the absolute ideal summer camping-place. Around, great masses of tumbled mountains swayed and tossed like the waves of a boisterous sea; below, deep ravines hung in mid-air, with their thick covering of Mediterranean pine and evergreen oak and Spanish chestnut; while above, in the distance, the silent white peaks of the snowy Djurjura still gleamed and shimmered, high over the hill-tops, in the evening sun. The painter could have stood and gazed at it for hours, but for the need for action; it was with an effort that he turned from that lovely prospect to bear his part in the prosaic work of tent-pegging and unpacking for the evening's rest.

By this time a noisy crowd of Kabyles from the village had gathered round the spot selected by the visitors, and begun to canvass in eager terms the motive of their visit and the nature of their arrangements. The natives were clearly ill-satisfied at their

choice. Le Marchant, though a tolerable Arabic scholar, knew not one word as yet of the Kabyle language; so he was unable to hold any communication with the men, who themselves were equally guiltless for the most part of either French or Arabic. It was evident, however, that the Kabyles as a whole regarded their proceedings with extreme distaste, and that the headman of the village, and a girl by his side, who seemed to be either his wife or daughter, had considerable trouble in restraining this feeling from breaking out into acts of open hostility.

The girl, in particular, at once arrested both the young Englishmen's passing attention. It was no wonder if she did. So glorious a figure they had seldom seen. Tall and lithe, with strong and well-made limbs, she seemed scarcely so dark as many English ladies, but with a face of peculiar strength and statuesque beauty. In type, she was not unlike the merry Kabyle

maiden who had looked up at them and laughed as they passed the washing-place by the torrent that morning; but her style was in every way nobler and higher. The features were bold and sculpturesque and powerful; serene intelligence shone out from her big eyes; she looked, Le Marchant thought, as a Spartan maiden might have looked in the best days of Sparta—as free as she was supple, and as strong as she was beautiful. At first, while the earlier preparations were being made, she hung aloof from the new-comers as if in speechless awe; but after a short time, as the crowd around grew less unruly and boisterous, and the attempts at intercommunication began to succeed, she approached somewhat nearer, and, equally removed from coquetry or boldness, watched their proceedings with the utmost interest.

At the outset, while the Spaniard and the Arabs helped in the work of setting up camp, conversation between the new-comers

was carried on almost entirely in pigeon French. And of French, even in its pigeon variety, the girl was clearly quite ignorant.

'*Vous ne parlez pas Français?*' Le Marchant asked her tentatively.

But the Kabyle maiden shook her head with a vigorous dissent, and put her finger to her mouth in sign of silence. So he turned away, and went on with his unpacking, while the girl, poised in a most picturesque attitude, with her arm on the ledge of the little domed tomb, stood by expectant, with a mutely attentive face, or made some remark now and again, in a low voice, to her fellow-countrymen, who stood aloof in the distance. They seemed to treat her with unusual respect, as a person of some distinction. No doubt she must be the headman's wife, Le Marchant thought, from the tone of command in which she spoke to them.

'Hand me that rope there, quick,' the naturalist called out at last, in English, to

Blake. 'Look sharp, will you? I want to fasten it down at once to this peg here.'

The beautiful Kabyle girl started at the words in the most profound surprise; but, to Le Marchant's astonishment, rose up at once, and handed him the rope, as though it was her he had asked for it, without a moment's hesitation.

'Curious how quick these half-barbaric people are to understand whatever one says to them in an unknown language,' Le Marchant went on, in a satisfied tone, to his English companion. 'This girl snapped up what I meant at once by the inflexion of my voice, you see, when I asked you for the rope, though I never even pointed my hand towards what I wanted.'

'I can talk like that myself,' the girl answered quietly, in English almost as good as Le Marchant's own, though with a very faint flavour of liquid Oriental accent. 'I heard you ask for the rope, and I fancied, of course, you were speaking to

me, and so I gave it to you. But I thought,' she added, with much natural dignity, 'you might have asked me a little more politely.'

If the girl was surprised to hear Le Marchant, Le Marchant, in turn, was positively thunderstruck to hear the girl. He could hardly believe the direct evidence of his own ears.

'Do they speak with tongues in these parts!' he cried, amazed; 'or has much wandering made me mad, I wonder? Come over here, Blake, and explain this mystery. This lady positively answered me in English.'

'We speak with our tongues, of course,' the girl went on, half angrily, misunderstanding his old-fashioned Scriptural phrase, 'just the same as you and everybody else do. We're human, I suppose; we're not monkeys. But, perhaps, you think, like all other Frenchmen, that Kabyles are no better than dogs and jackals.'

She spoke with pride, and fire flashed from her eyes. She was clearly angry. Le Marchant thought her pride and anger became her.

'I beg your pardon,' he went on in haste, very deferentially raising his hat by pure instinct, for he saw that without any intention of his own he had hurt her feelings. 'I really don't think you quite understood me. I was surprised to find anybody speaking my own tongue here so far in Kabylie.'

'Then you aren't French at all?' the girl asked eagerly, with a flush of expectation.

'No, not French—English; and I'm sorry I seemed, against my will, to annoy you.'

'If you're English we're friends,' the girl answered, looking up at him with a flushed face, as naturally as if she had met with stray Englishmen every day of her life. 'It was my father who taught me to talk like this. I loved my father, and he was an Englishman.'

Le Marchant and Blake both opened their eyes together in mute astonishment.

'And what's your name?' the painter ventured to ask, half dumb with surprise, after a moment's pause.

'My name's Meriem,' the girl replied simply.

'Meriem! Ah, yes, I dare say; that's Kabyle. But your father's?'

'My father's was Yusuf.'

'Yusuf?' Le Marchant cried. 'Why, Yusuf's not English! The English for that, you know, is plain Joseph. Was your father's name Joseph somebody?'

'No,' the girl answered, shaking her head firmly. 'His name was Yusuf. Only Yusuf. His Kabyle name, I mean. And mine's Meriem. In English, Yusuf used always to tell me, it's Mary.'

'But your surname?' Le Marchant suggested, with a smile at her simplicity.

Meriem shook her head once more, with a puzzled look.

'I don't understand that, at all,' she said, with a dubious air. 'I don't know all English. You say some things I don't make out. I never heard that word before —surname.'

'Look here,' Le Marchant went on, endeavouring to simplify matters to her vague little mind. 'Have you any other name at all but Meriem?'

'Yes, I told you—Mary.'

'Ah, of course. I know. But besides that, again. Think; any other?'

The girl looked down with a bewildered glance at her pretty bare feet.

'I'm sure I can't say,' she said, shaking her head. 'I never heard any.'

'But your father had! Surely he must have borne an English name? You must have heard him say it. He's dead, I suppose. But can't you remember?'

'Yes, Yusuf's dead, and so's my mother, and I live with my uncle. My uncle's the *Amine*, you know, the head of the village.'

And she waved her hand toward him with native gracefulness.

'Well, what was your father's English name?' Le Marchant persisted, piqued by this strange and unexpected mystery, 'and how did he come to be living here in Algeria?'

'He *had* an English name, a sort of a double name,' Meriem answered dreamily, after a moment's pause, during which it was clear she had been fishing with small success in the very depths of her memory. 'It was Somebody Something, I remember that. He told me that English name of his, too, one day, and begged me never, never to forget it. It was to be very useful to me. But I was not to tell it to anybody on any account. It was a great secret, and I was to keep it strictly. You see, it was so long ago, more than three years now, and I was so little then. I've never spoken this way, ever since Yusuf died, before. And I've quite forgotten what the name

was that he told me. I only remember his Kabyle name, Yusuf, and his French one, of course—that was Joseph Leboutillier.'

'What! he had a French name, too?' Le Marchant cried, looking up in fresh surprise.

'Oh yes, he had a French one,' Meriem answered quietly, as if everyone might be expected to know such simple facts. 'And that, of course, was what they wanted to shoot him for.'

CHAPTER V.

PROBLEMS.

At that very moment, before Le Marchant could gratify his curiosity any further, a voice from the crowd of Kabyle bystanders called out sternly, in a commanding tone: 'Meriem! Ho agha!' and the girl, with a start, hurried off at the sound into the eager group of her fellow-tribesmen. The crowd gathered round her in hot debate. For awhile, Le Marchant and Blake observed with dismay that their new friend was being closely questioned as to what she herself had said in the unknown tongue to the infidel strangers, and what the infidel strangers had said in return with so much apparent kindliness to her. Angry glances

were cast from time to time in their direction, and voices were raised, and fingers and hands gesticulated fiercely. But after awhile the beautiful girl's calm report seemed somewhat to still the excitement of the indignant Kabyles. She stood before them with outstretched arms and open palms, protesting, as Le Marchant gathered from her eloquent attitude, that these were indeed friends, and not enemies. Her protest prevailed. After a few minutes' interval, she returned once more, with a smiling face, this time accompanied by her uncle, the Headman, and two other Kabyles of evident tribal importance, and the three proceeded to hold an informal palaver with the strangers from Europe, Meriem acting the *rôle* of interpreter between the two high contracting parties.

The Headman spoke a few words first to the girl, who endeavoured, to the best of her ability, to impart their meaning in English to the attentive new-comers.

'My uncle asks,' she said, 'what you have come for, and why you have brought all these strange things on the ground here with you?'

'My friend is an artist,' Le Marchant answered simply; 'and I am a naturalist, a man of science. We've come to see the mountains and the country, and all that grows in them.'

Meriem shook her head with a gesture of deprecation.

'I don't know these words,' she said. 'Yusuf never used them. I don't know what is an artist and what is a naturalist. Why do you want to see the country?' And she added a few sentences rapidly in Kabyle to the three natives.

Le Marchant saw his mistake at once. The English words he had used were above the girl's simple childish level. He must come down to her platform. He tried over again.

'My friend paints pictures,' he said with

a smile, holding up a half-finished sketch of Blake's; 'and I shoot birds, and pick up plants and flowers and insects.'

Meriem nodded a satisfied nod of complete comprehension, and reported his speech in Kabyle to her uncle

'My people say,' she went on again, after a brief colloquy with her three compatriots, 'why do you want so much pencils and paper? Have you come to do good or harm to Kabylie? Does not the pulling out of pencils and paper mean much mischief?'

'Some of the paper is for my friend to paint on,' Le Marchant answered, with the calmness of a man well used to such dealings with suspicious foreigners; 'and part of it is for myself to dry plants and flowers in.'

'My uncle says,' Meriem went on once more after another short colloquy, 'are you not come to plan out new roads and forts, and will not the Kabyles be forced to work

on them, whether they will or whether they will not? Have not the French, who are the enemies of my people, sent you to look if the country is good, so that they may send Frenchmen to take it, and plough it? Did they not make roads the same way to Fort National, and give the land of the Kabyles over there to be ploughed and used by their own soldiers?'

'Explain to your people,' Le Marchant said gently, in his cool way, 'that we are English, like your father; not French, like the people who live at Fort National. We are Yusuf's countrymen. We have nothing to do with the Government at all. We plan no roads, and build no forts. We have only come for our own amusement, to paint the mountains, and to see what flowers and birds live in them.'

'And did you know Yusuf?' Meriem cried excitedly.

'No,' Le Marchant answered, and the girl's face fell sadly at the answer. 'But

we are friends, as he was. We wish well to the Kabyles, and all true believers.'

When Meriem had translated and dilated upon these last remarks with her own comments, the Kabyles seemed greatly mollified and reassured. The Headman in particular, with some effusion, seized Le Marchant's hand, and wrung it hard, murmuring many times over fervently, as he did so :

'Ingleez good, French bad ; Yusuf Ingleez,' with considerable *empressement.*

'He has picked up a few words of English, you see,' Meriem went on reflectively, 'from hearing me and my father, in the old days, talk so much together.'

It was all so simple and natural to herself that she seemed hardly to realize how strange it sounded in the unaccustomed ears of the two new-comers.

But they had no time just then to gratify their curiosity by making any further investigations or inquiries into the singular mystery of Meriem's antecedents. Strange

as the problem was, they must lay it aside unsolved for the present. Evening was coming on, and the practical work of getting things ship-shape in the tent for the night inexorably demanded all their immediate energies. There were the Arabs to be paid, and the mules to be dismissed. Diego, the Mahonnais servant, had still to light a fire of green sticks, and prepare supper; and the two young Englishmen had to make their own beds before they could lie on them, and prepare their quarters generally against the chance of rain or hail, or cold wind, or thunderstorm. Meriem and the three Kabyles, now passively friendly, stopped and looked on with profound interest at all these arrangements. The men, for their part, were too proud to do more than stand and gaze, with many expressions of wonder and surprise—'Allah is great! His works are marvellous!'—at the lamps and etnas, and tin biscuit-boxes, that came forth, one after another, in bewildering

array, from the magical recesses of Le Marchant's capacious leather travelling-case. But Meriem, more accustomed to household work, and even to a certain amount of something very like what we in England would call drudgery, lent a willing hand, with womanly instinct, in picking up sticks, and blowing the fire, and helping to lay out the strange metal pans, and plates, and pipkins.

'My people say they're not afraid now,' she remarked, with a gracious smile to Blake, as she looked up, all glowing, from the fire she was puffing with her own pretty mouth. 'If you're really English, they know you're good, for Yusuf was good, and he was an Englishman. Besides, I've told them I'm sure by your talk you're really English: I know it, because it's just like Yusuf's. The reason they were afraid at first was partly because they thought you were the wicked Frenchmen come to make a road and plant vines, the same as hap-

pened to our friends the Beni-Yenni, whom they turned out to die on the mountains. And then they were displeased, too, because you pitched your tent too near the tomb. They thought that was wrong, because this ground's sacred. Nobody comes here with shoes on his feet. It's the tomb of a Marabout.'

'What's a Marabout?' Blake asked, looking up good-humouredly. He was a handsome young fellow, and his teeth, when he smiled, showed white and even.

'A holy man—I think you call it a priest in English—who served Allah, and read the Koran much; and now that he's dead, he's made into a saint, and our people come to say prayers at his tomb here.'

'But we can shift the tent if you like,' Le Marchant put in eagerly, for he knew how desirable it is in dealing with Mahommedans to avoid shocking, in any way, their fierce and fanatical religious sentiments. 'We thought it was only an ordinary tomb;

we'd no idea we were trespassing on a sacred enclosure.'

'Oh no; it doesn't matter now at all,' Meriem answered, with a nod towards the three observant Kabyles. 'Those two men who are standing beside my uncle are Marabouts too—very holy; and as soon as they heard you were really English, they were quite satisfied, for they loved my father and protected him when the French wanted to catch him and shoot him. They've looked in the Koran, and tried the book; and they say the bones of the just will sleep none the worse for two just men sleeping peaceably beside them.'

'Whoever her father was,' Le Marchant remarked in a low tone to Blake, 'it's clear, anyhow, that he's fortunately predisposed these suspicious Kabyles in favour of his own fellow-countrymen and successors. We're lucky, indeed, to have lighted by accident on probably the only Kabyle village in Algeria where a single soul can

speak a word of English. We find an interpreter ready to our hand. I'm glad I trusted, as usual, to chance. My patron goddess has not deserted me.'

'And they say,' Meriem went on, after a few more words interchanged in a low voice with her own people, 'that they'll sell you milk and eggs and flour, and as long as you stop, I may come down here at times, and . . . and explain the things, you know, you want to say to them.'

'Act as interpreter,' Le Marchant suggested quickly.

Meriem's face lighted up with a flash of recognition at the sound.

'Yes, that's the word,' she said. 'I couldn't remember it. Interpret what you say to them. I'd forgotten "interpret." I expect I've forgotten a great many words. "Translate's" another. I recollect it now. You see, it's so long since I've spoken English.'

'The wonder is that you remember any

at all,' Le Marchant answered, with a polite little wave. It was impossible to treat that barefooted Kabyle girl otherwise than as a lady. 'But it'll soon come back now, if you often run down and talk with us at the tent here. We shall want you to help us with the buying and selling.'

'Yusuf would have liked that,' Meriem replied, with a faint sigh. 'He was anxious I should talk often, and shouldn't on any account forget my English.'

Le Marchant was silent. That naïve expression of her natural affection touched him to the heart by its quaint simplicity.

At that moment Diego, looking up from the pan he was holding over the fire with the omelette for supper, called out sharply, '*Viens donc, Mauresque! Donne la main ici! Viens vite, je te dis. Nous te voulons pour nous aider!*'

In a second Meriem drew herself up proudly, for though she did not understand the meaning of the words, or the habitual

insolence to the *indigènes* implied in the *tutoiement*, she caught readily enough at the imperiousness of the tone and the rude vulgarity of the gesture that accompanied it. The Kabyles, too, looked on angrily at this interference of a mere European with one of their own women—as who should presume to use their beast of burden without the preliminary politeness of asking them for the loan of it? But Le Marchant intervened with a conciliatory and deferential wave of his hand toward the offended Meriem. 'Overlook it,' he said softly, 'and forgive the fellow's rudeness. He knows no better; he's only a boor; I shall take care to teach him politer manners. Diego,' he went on in French to the Mahonnais, 'if you dare to speak so to this young lady again, remember, you go back that moment to Algiers without your wages. We depend here entirely on the goodwill of the *indigènes*. Treat her as you would treat a European lady.'

Diego could hardly believe his senses. *Cette demoiselle-ci*, forsooth, of a mere *indigène!* He turned back to the perusal of his peninsular cookery, full of muttered discontent.

'Pigs of natives,' he murmured, half aloud to himself, shredding in some garlic. 'Like a European lady! Things have come to a pretty pass in Algeria, indeed, if we must say Ma'amzelle to a *canaille* of a Mauresque!'

But the Kabyles nodded their hooded heads with a comical air of sagacious triumph.

'They are English, indeed,' the Headman exclaimed aloud in his own tongue to his friends. 'By the staff of the Prophet they are indeed English! Allah be praised that we have seen this day! These are good words! They take the part of a Kabyle girl against a dog of an infidel.'

'We go now,' Meriem said, moving back to her tribesmen, and waving an adieu to

the Englishmen with her delicate small hand. 'We know you are friends. Fear no disturbance; this place is yours. We will send you a *cous-cous*.'

'A *cous-cous!* What's that?' Blake asked, turning round to his more experienced companion.

'Oh, just the ordinary native dish, a sort of porridge or macaroni,' Le Marchant answered *sotto voce*. 'It's the customary mark of politeness and recognition to a stranger, like paying a first call, among the Arabs and Kabyles. To send you a *cous-cous* is to make a friend of you. We needn't eat it, you know. It's a sloppy, soppy, pappy mess, even when made by a European, and the native cookery isn't likely to improve it.'

'From her hands,' Blake answered, with unpremeditated enthusiasm, 'I could eat anything, even a dog-biscuit. What luck we're in, Le Marchant! She's a splendid creature—a model of ten thousand! I

could hardly take my eyes off her as long as she stopped here.'

Le Marchant gazed round at him with a sharp and hasty glance of inquiry.

'So you've altered your opinion, have you,' he asked wonderingly, 'about the merits and potentialities of these natural Kabyle women?'

'Oh, viewed as a model only, I mean,' Blake corrected in haste. 'I should love to paint her, of course; she's so splendid as an example of the pure unadulterated human figure. I don't go back one word of what I said otherwise. For wives, I prefer them civilized and educated. But if it comes to that, you must remember, Le Marchant, the girl's at least one half an Englishwoman.'

As he spoke, Meriem, tripping lightly and gracefully up the rocky path above that led by zigzag gradients to her uncle's hut—for it was hardly more—turned round again and waved them a last farewell with

that faultless arm of hers. Both young men raised their hats by some inner impulse, as to an English lady. Then the Kabyles turned round a sharp ledge of rock, and left them undisturbed to their supper and their conjectures. Le Marchant, gazing after her, saw a vision of glory. Blake saw but the picture of a Greek goddess, waving her arm, as on some antique vase, to Paris or Endymion.

CHAPTER VI.

MISS KNYVETT EXPLAINS HERSELF.

THAT same afternoon, in London town, where the atmosphere was perhaps a trifle less clear than on the mountains of Kabylie, Thomas Kynnersley Whitmarsh, Q.C., the eminent authority upon probate and divorce cases, was somewhat surprised at receiving an unexpected visit at his own chambers in Old Square, Lincoln's Inn, from his pretty little niece, Iris Knyvett. The Third Classic had by this time got over the first flush and whirl of congratulations and flattery. Her fame had almost begun to pall upon her. The *Times* had had a leader in her honour, of course, and the illustrated papers had engraved her portrait,

from which a captious world rejoiced to learn she did not wear blue spectacles. Fogeys, of whom the present writer is one, had croaked in letters to the public press about the danger of the precedent to all her sex; and enthusiastic speakers on ladies' platforms had hailed her success with jubilant whoops as the first dawn of a new era for emancipated womanhood. The Third Classic, in short, had been the talk of the town—a nine days' wonder. But owing to the opportune intervention of a small boy who could play the violin, and a new design for blowing up the Czar in the Summer Palace, the hubbub was beginning to die away a little now, and Iris Knyvett was able to face a trifle more calmly the momentous question of her own future career and place in the universe.

It is a characteristic of the present age that even women have begun at last to develop the rudiments of a social conscience.

No longer content to feed like drones at the world's table, giving nothing in return towards the making of the feast save the ornamental effect of their own gracious smiles and pretty faces, they have awoke with a start in these latter days to the sense of a felt need in life—to a consciousness of the want of a definite mission. It was a mission that Iris was now in search of, and it was on the subject of the choice or nature of that proposed mission that she came down dutifully to Old Square that fine afternoon to consult her uncle. This was nice of her; for, believe me, the higher education has not wholly succeeded in unsexing a woman if she still pretends, in the decorous old fashion, to pay a certain amount of ostensible external deference to the opinions and experience of her male relations.

The eminent Q.C. looked up with surprise from his devil's short notes on a fresh brief, which he was just that moment engaged in skimming. It was a slack afternoon in Old

Square, as it happened, and by a sort of minor miracle or special providence Uncle Tom had really half an hour to spare upon his pretty and now distinguished niece; but, even had it been otherwise, some client's case would surely have fared but scurvily at his hands at such a moment; for Uncle Tom was fond and proud of Iris, in spite of her heresies, and would have neglected Coleridge, C.J., himself to attend to her slightest whim or fancy.

'God bless my soul, my dear,' he exclaimed, in surprise, rising up from his desk, and pushing his niece with a hearty kiss and a vigorous shove into the one arm-chair (so dusty in the back that Iris, being still, though Third Classic, a woman for all that, trembled inwardly in silence for her nice new best afternoon frock); 'what on earth brings a learned lady like you down to Lincoln's Inn at this time of day, eh?'

'Well, uncle,' Iris answered, with modest eyes, 'to tell you the truth, if I may venture

to bother you, I've come down to ask your advice this afternoon about a private matter that greatly concerns me.'

The old barrister rubbed his fat hands together with a distinct glow of inward satisfaction.

'That's right, my dear,' he answered warmly. 'That's the right spirit. The good old spirit. I'm glad to see it, Iris; I'm very glad to see it. I was afraid you'd be too puffed up now even to look at me in the light of an adviser.'

Iris glanced down demurely and smiled.

'Uncle dear,' she said, with womanly softness, 'I hope I shall never be too puffed up to consult you about anything and everything on earth that concerns me. Since dear papa died, I feel you've always been as good as a father to me. You know that as well as I do; only you like to make me tell you again. But are you quite sure, you dear, that I'm not interrupting you?'

The old man's eyes had a gentle glisten

in them as he took his pretty niece's hand in his tenderly.

'Iris,' he answered, raising it with old-fashioned chivalry to his pursed-up lips (for, short and fat as he was, the eminent Q.C. was an old gentleman of much unsuspected sentiment), 'you never interrupt me, and you never shall. My most litigious client must wait your pleasure. I'm always glad at any time to see you here or elsewhere. My dear, I, who never had a daughter of my own, love you as dearly as if you were my own daughter. I'm only too glad to be of any help to you. I don't think I shall come down here much longer, Iris. The fact is, I'm getting tired of the Bar—its dulness and its hollowness. My boys are well enough provided for now, and I shall never be a judge—I've been far too honest for that—done no dirty work for either party. So there's nothing to keep me with my nose at the grindstone here much longer. I've feathered my nest in spite of 'em, and

I shall soon retire; and then I shall have nothing to do in life but to pose as your guardian, guide, philosopher, and friend, Miss Third Classic.'

And he eyed her admiringly. It was very wrong, but he liked his pretty niece all the better for having achieved those academical honours he, nevertheless, felt bound to deprecate.

Iris's eyes fell down once more.

'You're too good, uncle—and you're a darling!' she answered. 'Well, what I wanted to consult you about to-day is just this. Now that I've finished my education——'

Uncle Tom shook his head in vigorous dissent.

'Bad phrase, my dear,' he said, 'bad phrase—very. Too youthful altogether. Betrays inexperience. Nobody ever finished his education yet. Mine goes on still. It's in progress daily. Each new case teaches me something. And the judges teach

me, if nothing else, contempt of Court daily.'

Iris accepted the correction in good part.

'Well, then,' she went on, with a pretty smile, 'now that I've completed my University course——'

'Much better,' the old man muttered: 'much better; much better. Though not feminine.'

'I want to begin some work in life—something that will do good in some way to others—something that will make me feel I'm being of use to the world in my generation.'

Uncle Tom sniffed high.

'In short,' he said, with a pitying smile, 'a mission.'

Iris smiled in return, in spite of herself.

'Well, yes,' she good-humouredly murmured, 'if you choose to put it so, just that—a mission.'

Uncle Tom rose and went over without a word to a small tin box on a shelf opposite, conspicuously labelled, in large white letters,

'Estate of the late Rev. Reginald Knyvett.' From the box he took out a few papers and parchments, and from among them he soon selected one, tied round with a neat little tag of red tape, and marked on the back in a round legal hand, 'Descendants of the late Rear-Admiral William Clarence Knyvett, C.B.' He handed this formidable document over with a little silent bow to Iris, and seating himself then at his own desk, proceeded with uplifted pen in hand to address her, as jury, on the question at issue.

'My dear,' he said, in so forensic a tone that Iris half expected 'My Lud, I mean,' to follow, 'you must remember that you have already a mission cut out for you, and a mission for which it is your bounden duty as a citizen and a Christian most strenuously to prepare yourself. I know, of course, the sort of thing you had in your head. Come, now,' and he assumed his cross-examining tone, with a dig of his quill in the direction of the unwilling witness; 'confess you

were thinking of being a nurse in a hospital.'

Iris blushed a guilty acquiescence.

'Well, either that,' she answered grudgingly, 'or a tutorship, or lectureship at some ladies' college.'

'Precisely so,' Uncle Tom responded, with a crushing triumph. 'I knew as much. I was morally certain of it. It's always so. Young women in search of a mission nowadays have two ideas, and two ideas only—nursing or teaching. They want to turn the world into one vast hospital, or one vast boarding-school. They'd like us all to break our legs, or go into the Fourth Form again, that they might exercise their vocation by bandaging us up with ambulance shreds and list, or giving us lectures at great length on political economy. Now the fact is, Iris, that's all very well for plain young women of limited means, whom nobody's ever likely to think of marrying. Let them exercise

their vocation by all means, if they like it, provided always they don't expect me to break my leg to please them, or listen to their lectures on political economy. I draw a line there; no Mill or Ricardo. . . . But you, my dear, will have a great fortune. Somebody worthy of you will some day marry you—if anybody worthy of you exists anywhere. Now, to dispense that great fortune aright, to use it for the best good of humanity, you ought to be otherwise engaged than in bandaging, I think. Your main work in life will be, not to bandage, but to fulfil the part of a good wife and a good mother. I may be old-fashioned in thinking thus, perhaps; I may even be indelicate, since women nowadays are too delicate to face the facts of life—but, at any rate, I'm practical. These views are not the views in vogue at Girton, I'm aware, but they're common-sense—they're common-sense, for all that. The species won't die out because you've got the higher education.

What then? You ought to be trying to prepare yourself for your duties in life—the duties in life that will naturally devolve upon you as the mistress, dispenser, and transmitter of a Great Property.'

The last two words Uncle Tom pronounced with peculiar unction, for property in his eyes was something almost sacred in its profound importance.

'But how do I know?' Iris objected faintly, 'that Uncle Arthur will leave his money to me at all? Let alone the odious idea of waiting and watching till you come into somebody else's fortune.'

'How do you know?' Uncle Tom repeated, with a sudden explosion of virtuous indignation. 'Just look at that paper you hold in your hand, and I'll explain the whole thing to you, as clear as mud, in half a second. He'd hardly dare to leave it otherwise, I tell you, with *me* against him. I'd like to see him try, that's all, Iris. Just cast your eye on the paper in your

hand, and recollect that your grandfather, the Admiral—like a green bay-tree—had five sons—his quiver full of them. Five sons. Alexander, the squire, never married; Clarence, the scapegrace — the less said about Clarence the better; Sir Arthur, the general, whose wife pre-deceased him; Reginald, the parson, your father, my dear, and a better man never breathed, though he married my sister; and, lastly, Charles, that rascally lawyer, who has issue your cousin Harold. Well, your grandfather was ill-advised enough, though not a lawyer, to draw up his own will himself—a thing even I would hardly venture to do, with all my knowledge; "but fools rush in," etc., etc. As always happens in such cases, he drew it up badly, very badly—the Nemesis of the amateur—used technical terms he didn't understand, and omitted to explain his intentions clearly. Now he left the property in the first instance, for life only, to your uncle Alexander, the eldest son, as you see

by that paper—but you're not looking at it. Alexander, you observe, is there set down as *d. s. p.*—*decessit sine prole*—which I need hardly say to a Third Classic means that he died without lawful issue.'

'I see,' Iris answered, endeavouring to assume an interested expression, for the technicalities of the law failed to arouse in her the same enthusiasm as in the eminent authority on probate and divorce cases.

'Well, by the terms of the will in that case made and provided,' Uncle Tom went on, with demonstrative forefinger, 'the property was next to go for life to your uncle Clarence, provided he outlived your uncle Alexander. Clarence, who was to have power of appointment if he died with issue, was, as you will remember, an officer of Hussars, and, not to put too fine a point upon it, he disappeared under a cloud, getting killed abroad in the French service, in which he had enlisted, *before*, mark you, *before* the death of your uncle Alexander,

who deceased at Bath on April 4, 1883, without lawful issue. So that, so far as this present question is concerned, we may safely leave Clarence out of consideration. *Mortuus est sine prole*—he died without lawful issue of his body begotten, killed in action in foreign parts, on or about June 20, *anno domini* 1868, and has no further interest in this present inquiry.'

'I see,' Iris once more made answer, dutifully stifling a yawn.

'Well, then, and in that case,' Uncle Tom went on, with forensic quill pointed firmly towards her, 'the property was to devolve on the third brother, your uncle Arthur—you see him down there, Major-General Sir Arthur Wellesley Knyvett, K.C.B.—no doubt, as your grandfather fondly expected, on the same terms as his elder brothers. And Sir Arthur, in fact, as you well know, is now and at present the actual holder. But then, and this is *highly* important, your grandfather omitted, in Arthur's case, to

insert the limiting clause he had elsewhere used for his other children, and left, by implication, your uncle Arthur (purely by accident, I don't for a moment doubt) full power to bequeath it to whomever he chose, whether he had issue living or otherwise. And that power,' Uncle Tom continued, with a vicious snap of his jaw, 'your uncle Arthur now and always lays claim to exercise.'

'Then how am I to know?' Iris asked with a shudder, scarcely overcoming her natural objection to ask such a question, 'that Uncle Arthur means to exercise it in my favour?'

'Because,' Uncle Tom answered, with a wise air of exclusive knowledge, 'I have let him know privately, through a safe medium, that he daren't do otherwise. The terms of the will, in the latter part, are so vague and contradictory that nobody but I can understand them, and I can make them mean anything I like, or everything,

or nothing. Your grandfather then goes on to provide, after allowing your uncle Arthur to do as he will—so far as I can read his ungrammatical sentences—that in case your uncle Arthur dies without issue, the money shall go to the fourth son, the Rev. Reginald Knyvett, deceased, who married my sister, Amelia Whitmarsh; or, in case of his pre-decease, to his lawful issue, who, as you will see from the paper before you, and are, indeed, perhaps already aware, is Iris Knyvett, of Girton College, Cambridge, spinster, here present.'

'I suspected as much already,' Iris answered, smiling.

'Last of all on that paper, you will observe,' Uncle Tom remarked, growing suddenly severe and red in face, as was his wont in dealing with a specially awkward and damaging witness, 'comes the name of the fifth and youngest son, that rascally lawyer, Charles Wilberforce Knyvett. Now, your late uncle, Charles Wilberforce Knyvett,

for some unknown reason, was never in any way a favourite with his father. In fact, the Admiral profoundly disliked him. People say the old gentleman in his latter days thought his youngest son a sneak and a cur (which was unhappily true), and harboured a peculiar grudge against him. At any rate, he is conspicuously omitted from any benefit under the will, or, rather, it is provided in so many words that after all these lives have run out, the property shall *not* descend to Charles Wilberforce Knyvett, his heirs, executors, or assigns, but shall be diverted to another branch of the family, to the total exclusion of your uncle Charles and his sole issue, your cousin Harold.'

'Then Uncle Arthur couldn't leave the property to Harold, even if he wanted to?' Iris asked, somewhat languidly, but with a resolute desire, since her uncle wished it, to master the intricacies of this difficult problem in the law of inheritance.

'*He* says he can, but *I* say he can't,' Uncle Tom answered, with a glow of righteous triumph. 'I've tried the will by all the precedents, and all I've got to say is this—I'd just like to see him try it.' And Uncle Tom unconsciously assumed the attitude of defence familiar to the patrons of the British prize-ring.

'That's a pity,' Iris answered, looking him straight in the face; 'and it seems somehow awfully unfair; for Uncle Arthur's so fond of Harold, you know; and he's never seen *me* since I was a baby in swaddling-clothes.'

Uncle Tom laid down his glasses on his desk with a bounce. 'God bless my soul!' he cried, in a paroxysm of astonishment. 'Is the girl cracked? Has much learning made her mad at Girton? Going to play into your enemy's hand, eh, and chuck up a fortune of six thousand a year, all for the sake of a piece of sentiment! No, no: thank heaven I know the law; and not a

single penny of the Admiral's property shall that scoundrel Harold ever touch or handle. Not a doit, not a cent, not a sou, not a stiver. He won't, and he shan't, so that's all about it!'

CHAPTER VII.

ART AND NATURE.

In a very few days Eustace Le Marchant and Vernon Blake had settled down comfortably to their respective pursuits on the wind-swept summit of the mountain of the Beni-Merzoug. The simple-hearted Kabyles, as soon as they were quite convinced that the new-comers were neither French spies nor agricultural pioneers sent out to spread the concomitant blessings of civilization and confiscation of land, welcomed the young Englishmen with most cordial hospitality to their lonely hill-tops. Their courtesy, in fact, seemed likely at first to prove, if anything, a trifle too pressing;

for almost every family in the village insisted on sending a *cous-cous* in turn, in polite recognition of the new visitors. Now, Meriem's *cous-cous*, much to the Englishmen's ingenuous surprise, prepared as it was by those dainty and dexterous fingers, had turned out upon tasting a triumphant success; but the *cous-couses* which succeeded it, and all of which politeness compelled the inhabitants of the camp to devour in public to the uttermost morsel before their entertainers' eyes, were far from attaining the same high level of primitive cookery. Deft fingers count for much even in the smallest matters. Meriem herself, indeed, was of infinite use to them in arranging supplies; and her uncle the Headman, with his friends the Marabouts, gave them every facility for shooting and sketching, and hunting specimens throughout the whole country-side for miles in either direction.

On the first morning after their arrival in the hills, Blake strolled out by himself, with

sketch-book in hand, for a walk through the village, while Le Marchant was busy unpacking and arranging his bird-stuffing and beetle-preserving apparatus. To Vernon Blake, the village was indeed a fresh world of untold enjoyment. The rough-built houses, with their big stone walls and tile-covered roofs; the broad eaves projecting over the open courtyard, and supported by rude wooden Ionic columns; the tall lithe men with their simple but picturesque and effective garb, their bronzed features, and their long oval faces; the women at the fountain with water-jars on their heads, walking stately and erect, with exquisite busts and rounded limbs, just peeping through the graceful folds of their hanging *chiton*—each and all of these suggested to his soul endless subjects for innumerable pictures, where girls of this exquisite Italian type might form the figures in the foreground, exactly suited to his sympathetic pencil. He had come to the very right

place for his art. Models crowded upon him spontaneously at every corner.

A turn of the road near the Headman's cottage brought him suddenly, with a start, face to face with Meriem herself, engaged on a little flat platform, with a group of Kabyle girls of her own age, in moulding coarse vases of hand-made pottery. Blake, with his soft-soled white-linen shoes, came upon them so noiselessly and unexpectedly that for half a minute the girls themselves, intent upon their work, never so much as perceived the presence of a stranger. The artist, drawing back, for fear he might disturb them, drank in the whole group with unspoken delight. He paused on the path a little above where they stood, and looked down, all interest, upon that unstudied picture. The graceful Kabyle maidens in their simple loose dress, with feet bare to the ankle, were stooping picturesquely over the jars they were moulding, in unconscious attitudes of grace and

beauty. Some of them were bareheaded, others wore on their hair a sort of pointed fez, or Phrygian kaftan, which half confined, half let loose to the wind, their raven-black locks. The jars, in shape like an old Roman amphora, were poised upon the ground by means of a little round mud base; the naïve young potters, each full of her own task, and unmindful of the others, built up the big vessels stage after stage by adding on loose handfuls of moist and flattened clay to the half-finished outline. They were evidently ignorant of the use of the wheel—so remote and unsophisticated are these wild mountain-people—yet the shapes which grew slowly under their moulding fingers were each almost perfect of their own simple kind, and bore each the distinct and unmistakable impress of an individual fancy. It was pretty to see them stooping, thus unconscious, over the wet vases of yellow clay, with one hand inside supporting and modelling the freshly-

added portion, while the other without was employed in smoothing it, and shaping the whole, by dexterous side-pressure, to the required roundness.

Blake would have pulled out his pencil on the spot, and sketched them roughly in their attitudes, all unwitting as they stood, had not one little fair-haired and blue-eyed maiden, of that almost Scandinavian type so common here and there in Kabyle villages, looked laughingly up from her two-handled jar, and caught his eye on a sudden with a frightened little scream of shyness and astonishment. An infidel was standing there, gazing upon them unseen. 'A stranger! A stranger!' At the sound, all the others started up in concert, and in a moment all was giggling and blushing confusion. So strange a visitor never before had disturbed their peace. Some of the girls held their hands to their faces like wayward children to hide their blushes; others fell back a pace or two in startled haste

under the overhanging eaves of the Headman's cottage. Who could say what designs the infidel might harbour? Meriem alone raised herself erect, and gazed the painter fairly in the face with the frank self-possession of a European lady.

Blake lifted his hat as instinctively as before, for he felt her presence; and Meriem, in reply, raised her hand, with a wave, to the level of her face, in an easy and graceful natural salutation.

'Good-morning, mademoiselle,' the artist said gaily, in high spirits at the scene and its pictorial capabilities.

'Good-morning, friend,' Meriem answered quickly, a slight shade passing, as she spoke, over her open countenance. 'But why do you call me mademoiselle, if you please? I'm not a Frenchwoman, as you seem to think me.'

Blake saw she was evidently annoyed at the politely-meant title.

'I called you mademoiselle,' he said

apologetically, 'because I wanted to call you something, and, as I suppose you're a French citizen, I didn't know what else on earth to call you.'

'Why not call me by my name, as everyone else does?' the beautiful barbarian answered simply. 'I'm just Meriem to all the village.'

Blake was a little taken aback at the startling proposal. So much familiarity fairly took his breath away. This was indeed to rush *in medias res* with undue precipitancy.

'Am I to say Meriem, then?' he inquired rather low, with natural bashfulness.

'What else should you say?' Meriem answered naïvely. 'Don't people call one another by their names everywhere?'

'Why, yes,' Blake answered, with some little hesitation, 'but not by their Christian names, you know—at least, in England—except as a mark of special favour and close intimacy.'

'Meriem is *not* a Christian name,' the girl answered hastily, almost indignantly, 'and I'm not a Christian; I'm a true believer.'

'But your father was a Christian,' Blake ventured to reply, astonished at the unwonted tone of her disclaimer; 'and you told us yesterday your English name at least was Mary.'

'My father was no Christian!' Meriem cried aloud, with flashing eyes and fiery indignation. 'People in the village accused him of that sometimes, I know, but it was never true; I'm sure it was never true, for Yusuf was kinder and better than anyone—no infidel could ever be as kind as that. He was a good Moslem, and he read the Koran, and prayed at the tombs, and went to mosque like the rest on Fridays regularly. He was a true man, and everyone loved him. No one shall say a word before me against my father. As to my name, why, Mary and Meriem's all the same, of course; and I was called, so the women in the

village say, after the name of the mother of Aissa-ben-Meriem. But Moslems, too, honour him as a very great prophet, you know, though not so great, naturally, as our own Prophet Mahommed.'

Blake hardly understood her meaning to the full, for his acquaintance with her creed was strictly confined to 'The Arabian Nights' and 'The Revolt of Islam;' but it gave him a little shock of surprise and horror to hear anyone, and especially a woman, so indignantly repel the imputation of Christianity. Yet a moment's reflection served to show him, though by no means a philosophically-minded or cosmopolitan young man, that in such surroundings nothing else would have been natural, or even possible. Meriem, no doubt, had never heard Christians spoken of before except with the profoundest scorn and detestation of the Faithful. It hardly even occurred to her simple mind that her hearer himself, infidel as he was, could think seriously well of

them, or regard them as the equals of true believers.

He turned the conversation, accordingly, of set purpose. 'You all looked so pretty,' he said, 'as I came along the path, bending over your jars and modelling your pottery, that I was longing in my heart to stand still and study you. I wanted to sketch you all just as you stood there.'

'To *what?*' Meriem cried, with a little start of dismay; an unknown word encloses for a woman such infinite possibilities.

'To sketch you, you know,' Blake repeated reassuringly. 'To put you in my book like this, you see. To make a little picture of you.'

Meriem laughed, a sweet, frank laugh, as she turned the pages of his book with wondering eyes. 'That would be nice,' she said. 'They're pretty things, these. But would it be *right*, I wonder? All good Moslems are forbidden, you know, by the Prophet's law, to make a picture or image

of anything in heaven or earth or the water under them. There are no pictures anywhere in any of the mosques. Would the Marabouts think it was right for us to be painted ?'

'But I'm not a Moslem, you see,' Blake replied, smiling, with ready professional casuistry. 'And all that you've got to do yourselves, you know, is just to stand leaning as you were over your pottery, and allow me to commit the sin of sketching you on my own account. It won't hurt *me:* I'm a hardened offender. Ask the other girls, there's a good soul, whether they'll come back as they were and let me sketch them.'

'And are the other girls to be put in the picture, too ?' Meriem asked, looking up, with a faint undertone of disapprobation.

'Certainly,' Blake replied, without perceiving the slight inflection of disappointment in her voice. 'Now go, there's a good girl, and make them come back and stand nicely as I tell them.'

'My father used to say that, "Now go, there's a good girl,"' Meriem answered, with a faint rising flush of pleasure ; and, pleased at the word, she went off at once to do as he directed her. He had stirred an old chord in her simple nature.

In half a dozen minutes Blake had got two sitters, with a little coaxing and manual posing, which they seemed to resent far less than European girls would have done under the circumstances, into tolerable order for his proposed study. At first, to be sure, he had no little difficulty in getting them to keep for five seconds together to one posture or attitude. They seemed to think it a matter of supreme indifference whether a face begun at one angle should be continued at the same or a totally unlike one. But with some small trouble, by Meriem's aid, and with the magnificent promise of untold wealth in the shape of a silver half-franc a-piece visibly dangled before their astonished eyes, he succeeded at last in inducing each

girl to maintain something like a consistent attitude; at least, while he was engaged upon his first rough sketch of her own particular face and figure. The guileless damsels, dazzled at the prospect of such unexpected wealth, would have sat there all day as still as mice for so magnificent a payment; but at the end of an hour or two Blake dismissed them all with mutual satisfaction to their various homes, and prepared himself to return in excellent spirits to the tent with his prize for luncheon. 'That ought to fetch them,' he murmured to himself, as he surveyed his own dainty and unaffected sketch with parental partiality.

'Now, Meriem, you've done more for me to-day than all the rest of them put together. You must have a whole franc yourself for your share in the proceedings.' And he held that vast store of potential enjoyment, proffered in a single shining coin, between his delicate thumb and opposing fore-finger.

Meriem had never possessed so much

money in her life before ; but she drew her hand back from him with a startled gesture, and held it like a child behind her back with an unsophisticated expression of offended dignity. 'Oh no,' she answered, blushing crimson to the neck ; 'I could never take that. Please don't ask me again. I'm glad if I was able to help you with your picture. Though, of course, it was wrong of us to let you draw us.'

Blake saw at a glance that she really meant it, and with the innate courtesy of a gentleman refrained at once from pressing the obnoxious coin any further upon the girl's unwilling notice. He replaced the franc quietly in his waistcoat pocket, and said as he did so, in an unconcerned voice, to turn the current of both their thoughts, 'I suppose the other girls will go off with their money to get themselves something at the shops in the village'

'At the what ?' Meriem asked, with a look of bewilderment.

'At the shops,' Blake answered, in a jaunty tone. 'I suppose you've got shops of some sort or other in this benighted country.'

'I don't know what you mean,' Meriem answered, shaking her head vigorously. 'I never heard of them. Shops, did you say? I don't think we've got any—unless it's cakes; but if I only knew exactly what you meant, and could say it in Kabyle, I'd ask my uncle.'

Blake laughed a laugh of unaffected amusement. It seemed so odd to be talking to somebody in his own tongue—and so familiarly, too—who had never even so much as heard what sort of thing a shop was. 'Why, where do you buy things?' he asked curiously. 'Where do you get the food and utensils, and so on, that you're in want of?'

'We make them, or grow them mostly, of course,' Meriem answered quickly (everything, it seemed, was 'of course' to Meriem,

because her experience had all been so limited, and so uncontradicted) ; 'but when we want to buy things from other tribes, we go down and get them with money at the markets. Or sometimes we exchange a goat or a chicken. There's a market one day of the week, but I don't remember its English name—the day after Friday—here with us at Beni-Merzoug ; and there are others on other days at neighbouring villages, sometimes one and sometimes another. And that's where we always go to buy things.'

Blake smiled to himself a smile of amused superiority. To think that Le Marchant should have talked seriously, from a marrying point of view, about a girl who had never even heard of shopping! And yet in more civilized European climes many a good man would be heartily glad to find himself a wife on whose innocent mind—but on second thoughts I refrain from making any nasty reflections.

He shut up his sketch-book, and rose to

leave. Meriem looked after him with a look of regret. How wonderful that a man should be able to make pictures like that! They seemed to live and breathe, she fancied. She had hardly ever seen a picture at all before, except a few coarse French lithographs bought by the villagers at Tizi-Ouzou. But she had never been as far as Tizi-Ouzou even, herself. Her narrow little experience was bounded hard and fast by her own mountain peak and its adjacent valleys.

And how beautiful he looked when he turned and smiled at her!

But Blake went away and thought of nothing. He showed his sketch to Le Marchant in high spirits when he reached the tent. Le Marchant's face fell as he looked at it.

'So you've been drawing Meriem!' he said. 'You've found her out already! A very pretty picture. You ought to work it up into something very good! It's life-like, and therefore of course it's beautiful.

. . . . But you've been with Meriem all the morning, while I've been unpacking my goods and chattels. I wondered she hadn't been up here before to visit us.'

CHAPTER VIII.

NO SOUL.

For the next week or so the two young Englishmen were busy enough hunting and sketching all day long among the fresh ground they had thus successfully broken for themselves in the North African Highlands. Le Marchant spent much of his time up among the jagged peaks and bare rocks of the mountains, happy enough if he returned at night with a specimen of 'that rare and local bird, the Algerian titmouse,' or with a snail as big as a pin's head, 'a perfect treasure, you know, my dear fellow, hitherto only known to science in the mountains of Calabria and in the Albanian Highlands.' Zeal for his great

work on 'Structure and Function' had swallowed him up, and gave zest and importance to the minutest find in beetles or gadflies.

Blake, on the other hand, loitered much more around the precincts of the village itself and the cultivated plots that hung along the narrow ledges of the hillside; for his quarry was man, and he loved to drink his fill of that idyllic life, so purely Arcadian in its surviving simplicity, that displayed itself with such charming frankness and unconcern before his observant eyes each sunny morning. It was the artist's Greece revived for his behoof; the Italy of the Georgics in real life again. The labourer leaning hard on his wooden plough, the yoke of mountain oxen that tugged it through the ground, the women at the well with their coarse, hand-made jars, the old men chatting under the shade of the ash-trees beside the tiny mosque, all afforded him subjects for innumerable studies. He

beheld before his face a Virgilian eclogue for ever renewing itself; and the young painter, who had never read his Eclogues in the Latin at all, could appreciate whatever was most vivid and picturesque in the life of these simple idyllic mountaineers with an eye as keen in its way as Virgil's own had been.

Meriem, too, often came up in the evenings to the tent in her capacity as interpreter; and Le Marchant, who could see and admire strong traits of character wherever he found them, soon learnt to read in the Kabyle-bred girl, with her open mind and serene intelligence, many marks of fine and sterling qualities. But he could gather little further by all his inquiries about the mystery of her origin. All that Meriem herself could tell him of her parentage was simply this—Yusuf had a French name as well as an English and a Kabyle one; and if his French name had ever leaked out, the people at Fort National would have taken

him and shot him. Le Marchant, indeed, was just at first inclined to consider the beautiful girl's father was a runaway convict!

Inquiries directed through Meriem's mouth to her uncle the Amine were met in a distinctly reserved spirit. It seemed as though the old Kabyle was afraid even now of betraying the dead man's secret—if, indeed, he had one, or if the Amine knew it. Perhaps these English might be in league with the infidel French, after all, and might be plotting harm against himself and his tribesmen—else why should they thus minutely inquire about the girl's antecedents? A mere girl; why bother their heads with her? Yusuf was dead; let him sleep in peace where good Moslems had laid him. All that the Amine could or would tell them amounted in the end simply to this—that Meriem's father had come to them as a guest after a great battle in a local insurrection (one of those petty risings,

no doubt, in which the tribes of Kabylie are for ever striving to reassert their independence of French authority); that he was a good man, who loved the Kabyles; that he wore the native dress, and lived as the tribe lived; that he was a faithful Moslem and a clever hunter—considerations apparently of equal importance in the eyes of the villagers; that he had married the Amine's sister, Meriem's mother, long since dead, according to the rites and ceremonies of the Kabyle people; and that he had died by falling over a ledge of rock three years back, while wandering by himself under unexplained circumstances among the high mountains. So much the Amine, bit by bit, suspiciously admitted. With that scanty information, no more being forthcoming, Le Marchant for the present was forced to content himself.

Blake, on the other hand, with his more easy-going and pleasure-loving artistic temperament, troubled himself little about

all these things. Gallio that he was, it sufficed him to sit in the shade of the chestnuts and paint Meriem as the foreground figure in almost all his pictures rather than to indulge in otiose speculations as to her possible ancestry and problematical parentage. 'She's a first-rate model,' he said, 'whoever her father may be. King Cophetua's beggar-maid could never have been lovelier.' And that contented him. He wanted only to find physical beauty. So he got to work soon on studies for a large canvas, with Meriem in the centre, her water-jar poised with queenly grace upon her stately head; and he was well satisfied to sketch in her shapely chin and throat without any remote genealogical inquiries to distract his mind from the exquisite curve on her neck and shoulders.

'But if you're going to give me regular sittings, Meriem,' he said to her seriously one morning under the chestnuts, venturing

to broach once more the tabooed subject, 'you must really let me pay you so much a day, because I shall want you, of course, for so many hours every morning regularly, and it'll take you away altogether at times from your household duties.'

'My aunt can do those,' Meriem answered quietly, shaking her head. 'I like to sit for you; it gives me pleasure. I like to see these beautiful pictures growing up so curiously under your hands. It's almost like magic.'

'Thank you,' the Englishman answered. 'That's very kind of you. Praise from your lips, Meriem, is worth a great deal to me.'

He said it lightly, with a smile and a bow, as a commonplace of politeness, for to him the words meant very little. But to Meriem, who had never heard women treated with ordinary Western chivalry before, they were full of profound and delicious meaning; they struck some un-

known heart-string deep down in her being. She blushed up to her eyes (a good moment for a painter; Blake seized it gratefully), and then relapsed for awhile into joyful silence.

'Yes, yes! just *so!*' Blake cried, stopping her on a sudden, with both his hands uplifted in warning, as she fell naturally into one of her easy, graceful Hellenic attitudes. 'That's just how I want you; don't move a muscle—you're beautiful that way. It shows off your arm and head and the pose of your neck to such absolute perfection. You're prettier than ever like that, I declare, Meriem.'

Meriem, all conscious of herself for the first time in her life, stood as he directed her, without moving a line. She could have stood there for ever, indeed, with Blake to paint her.

The artist went on without noticing her emotion.

'Don't let my uncle know,' she said, after

a short pause, with some slight embarrassment, and hesitating as she spoke, 'that you offered—that you wanted—to give me money for sitting.'

'I won't,' Blake answered, laughing; 'I can promise you that. With my present knowledge of his language, indeed, I should find it difficult.' He played with his brush —dab, dab, on the canvas. 'But why not, Meriem?'

The girl blushed again.

'Because—he would take it,' she answered simply.

Blake smiled and nodded, but said nothing.

They were standing outside the village on the open space in front of the tiny whitewashed mosque, and men and women came past frequently, and paused to look, with clicks of surprise or interest or approbation, at the portrait on the easel, as Blake sat and painted it. Presently, a young Kabyle of handsome form and well-made

features came up in his turn, and looked, like the others; then he turned round sharply, and spoke for awhile, with a somewhat earnest air, to Meriem; and, as Blake imagined, there was audible in his tone some undercurrent of imperious and angry expostulation.

'Who's that?' the Englishman asked, looking up with a quick glance from his seat on the rock as the Kabyle turned on his heel and retired, half haughtily.

'That's Ahmed,' Meriem answered, in the same 'of course' style of conversation as usual, as if everybody must needs know all her fellow-villagers.

'And who's Ahmed?' the painter went on, still working steadily at the flesh-tints of the shoulder.

'The man who's going to marry me,' Meriem answered, in just as quiet and matter-of-fact a voice as that in which she would have told him the price of spring chickens.

Blake started back in almost speechless surprise.

'*That* man marry you!' he cried, with a toss of his handsome head. 'Why, he's nothing but a common Kabyle mule-driver. What impudence! What presumption! And do you love him, Meriem?'

'No,' Meriem answered, in the same calm and downright voice, without the slightest attempt at concealing her feelings in that particular.

'Then why on earth are you going to marry him?' Blake asked, astonished.

'Because my uncle has agreed to sell me to him,' Meriem said simply. 'As soon as Ahmed's earned money enough to buy me, my uncle's going to let him have me cheap. Perhaps Ahmed 'll have saved enough by the next olive harvest. He's offered my uncle a very fair price: he's going to give him a patch of land and two hundred francs for me.'

Blake was genuinely shocked and sur-

prised at this painful disclosure. In spite of his contempt for barbaric women, he felt instinctively already that Meriem was far too much of an English girl at heart to be bought and sold like a sheep or a chattel. He explained to her, briefly, in simple words, that in England such means of arranging marriages were not openly countenanced by either law or custom; indeed, with a generous disregard of plain facts—allowable, perhaps, under the peculiar circumstances—he avoided all reference to settlements or jointures, and boldly averred, with pardonable poetic license, that English-women always bestowed their hearts and hands on the man of their choice who seemed to them most worthy of their young affections.

'That's a beautiful way,' Meriem murmured reflectively, after the handsome painter had dilated with enthusiasm for a few minutes on the purity and nobility of our English marriage system. 'That's a

lovely way. I should like that ever so much. I wish for some things I had been born in England. Although you're all infidels, you have some good ways there. But here, in Kabylie, of course, I must follow in all things the Kabyle custom.'

'So you mean to obey, and to marry Ahmed?' Blake asked, half shocked, but continuing to work at the elbow and forearm.

'What else can I do?' Meriem asked, looking up with a quiet sigh. 'I can't refuse to go where my uncle bids me.'

'But how can you find it in your soul?' Blake began, half indignantly.

'I've got no soul,' Meriem interrupted, in a perfectly serious voice. 'We Mussulman women are born without any.'

'Well, soul or no soul, wouldn't you much prefer,' Blake went on with fire, warming up to his subject, 'instead of marrying that fellow with the mules, who'll probably abuse you, and overwork you, and

beat you, and ill-treat you, to marry some Englishman with a heart and a head, who'd love you well, and be proud of your beauty, and delight in decking you out in becoming dress, and be to you a friend, and a shield, and a lover, and a protector ?'

A bright light burned for a moment like flame in Meriem's eyes; then she cast them down to the ground, and her bosom heaved, as she answered slowly, in a very low voice, 'No Kabyle ever spoke to a woman like that. They don't know how. It's not in their language. But Yusuf used to speak to me often that way. And he loved my mother, and was, oh! so kind to her, till the day she died. I think you English, infidels as you are, must be in some ways a blessed people; so different from the French—the French are wicked. It's a pity the English aren't true believers.'

Her heart was beating visibly through her robe now. Blake felt he had said a little too much, perhaps, for he meant

nothing more than the merest flirtation ; so he turned the subject with a careless smile to the get-up of the picture. 'I'm going on to your hand and wrist next, Meriem,' he said, with a wave, rising up to pose her fingers exactly as he wanted them. 'Look here, this locket round your neck's in the way. Couldn't you take it off? It spoils the natural folds of your drapery, and incommodes the hand so.'

It was a small square charm, in shape like a tiny box or book, made of coarse silver work, inlaid with enamel, and relieved by bosses of lapus-lazuli, and other cheap stones, such as all Kabyle women wear, as an amulet hung round their necks to protect them from the evil eye, and other misfortunes.

'"With coral clasps and amber studs,"'

Blake murmured to himself, as he looked at it closely. He laid his hand upon it with a gesture of apology, and a 'Will you permit me, Meriem?'—meaning to remove it by

passing the chain over her head and kaftan. But the girl, with a sudden convulsive effort of both her hands, clasped it hard and tight to her bosom.

'Oh no,' she cried, 'not that; not that, please! You must never take *that*. I couldn't possibly allow you. You mustn't even touch it. It's very precious. You must keep your hands off it.'

'Is it something, then, so absolutely sacred?' Blake asked, half laughingly, and suspecting some curious Mahommedan superstition.

'Yes, more than sacred,' Meriem answered, low. 'It was Yusuf who hung it there when he was going away, and he told me often, with tears in his eyes, never to let anybody lay hands upon it anywhere. And nobody ever shall, till I die with it on my neck. For Yusuf's sake it shall always hang there. When I've borne a son'—she said it so simply that Blake hardly noticed the unconventional phrase—'the Kabyle

custom is to wear the charm, for an honour, on the forehead. But I shall never move mine from my neck at all, though the women may laugh at me. I shall wear it for ever where my father hung it.'

The painter, abashed, held his peace at once, and asked her no more. He saw she felt too deeply on the subject to make it either wise or kind for him to interfere with her feeling.

That evening at the tent, as he sat with Le Marchant, stuffing birds and pinning out butterflies, Meriem came up with a message from the Amine about some domestic trifle of milk-supply or goat-mutton. Le Marchant was glad to see her, too, for he wanted to ask her a favour for himself. Perhaps he was jealous that his handsome lodger should monopolize so large a portion of the beautiful Kabyle girl's time and attention; perhaps, being by nature of a studious turn, he was genuinely anxious to make the best of his linguistic opportuni-

ties. At any rate, he wanted to inquire of Meriem whether she would give him lessons in the evening in the Kabyle language. Meriem laughed. She was perfectly ready to do her best, she said, provided always the lessons were given with all publicity on the platform outside the Amine's cottage.

'For our Kabyle men,' she added, with her transparent simplicity, 'are very jealous, you know—very, very jealous. They would never allow me to come here to teach you. If I came without leave, they would stick knives into me.'

'And may I learn, too?' the painter asked, with his sunny smile.

'Yes, Blake, certainly,' Meriem answered at once, with natural politeness.

Both the men laughed. From that stately and beautiful girl's lips the mannish colloquialism sounded irresistibly funny.

'You mustn't say "Blake,"' the painter exclaimed, in answer to Meriem's startled

look of mute inquiry at their unexpected merriment.

'But Le Marchant always calls you Blake,' Meriem objected, much puzzled. 'In England, don't people think it right for women to call men by their own names, then?'

'Well, not by their surnames alone; it doesn't sound nice. They generally put a Mr. before them. But if you like,' Blake went on with audacious ease, for he was far from shy before the poor Kabyle girl, 'you may call me Vernon. That's my Christian name; and that's how Englishwomen always call a man they know well, and really care for.'

'I really care for you, Vernon; I like you very much,' Meriem said straightforwardly.

'In that case, I, too, shall claim the same privilege of friendship, and ask you to call me plain Eustace,' Le Marchant put in, with gentle solicitude.

'Very well, Plain Eustace,' Meriem answered, in her innocence taking the name in good faith as a single compound one.

The laughter that met this unintentional sally was so very contagious, that Meriem herself joined in it heartily, though it was some minutes before she could be made fully to understand the intricate mysteries of European nomenclature.

When she had left the tent that night, her errand finished, Le Marchant turned round to his easy-going travelling companion with much earnestness in his quiet eye.

'Blake,' he said seriously, 'I hope you're not trying to make that poor girl fall in love with you.'

'I'm not doing anything to *make* her fall in love,' Blake answered evasively; 'but she's never met anybody who treated her decently in her life before, and I suppose she can't help perceiving the . . . well, you know, the difference between you or me,

for example, and these ignorant Kabyle fellows.'

'Blake, you must surely see for yourself that in feeling and in intellect the girl's more than half an Englishwoman. If you win her heart, and then go away and leave her without a word to this man you say her uncle sold her to, you'll murder her as truly as if, like the Kabyles, you stuck a knife into her.'

Blake shuffled about uneasily on his campstool.

'She can't be such a fool as to think I should ever dream of marrying her,' he replied, with a half-averted face.

Le Marchant looked across at him with mild eyes of wonder.

'At any rate, Blake,' he said, in a very solemn, warning voice, 'don't engage her affections and then desert her. She may be a Kabyle in outward dress; but to do that would be as cruel a deed as ever you could do to one of those educated English ladies

you think so much about. Of one blood—all the nations of the earth. Hearts are hearts the whole world over.'

Blake was silent, and threw back his head carelessly to inspect the sketch he was busily cooking.

CHAPTER IX.

STRIKING A CLUE.

It was a glorious hot day in an Algerian July. The mountains stood clear from cloud in every direction, with their peaks etched out distinctly against the gray background of the hazy-white sky; and Le Marchant made up his mind early in the morning to attempt the upper slopes of the Lalla Khadidja dome, one of the highest among the surging giants of the Djurjura, covered thick with snow for nine months of the year, but now just free at last, under the influence of a burning hot spell of sirocco, from the white cap it had worn since the beginning of winter. Blake, ever eager in the quest of the picturesque, was

ready enough to join him in his mountaineering expedition; while Meriem, who had once or twice made her way on foot as a pilgrim to the tiny Mahommedan shrine of the Lady Khadidja, which lies nestled amid snowdrifts just below the summit, had after some hesitation agreed to accompany them, with two other of the village girls, as guide and interpreter. Nothing could have been nicer or more satisfactory—to the painter. Just at the last moment, however, as the party was on the very point of starting, that formidable Ahmed came lounging up, with his full-fed air of Oriental insolence, to interpose his prospective veto. It made Blake's blood boil to see how the fellow treated that beautiful model. For some minutes he spoke in a hectoring voice with Meriem; and it was clear from the gestures and tones of the pair that Meriem for her part was by no means measured in the terms of her answers.

'What does the man say?' Blake asked

at last, unable to restrain his disgust and anger.

'He says,' the girl answered, with a flushed face, 'he'll never let me go mountain-climbing with the infidels. But I don't care a pin. He's a bad man. He's jealous—jealous; that's what he means by it.'

'And what did you tell him?'

'I told him,' Meriem replied, with a little stamp of her shoeless foot on the bare rock, 'he might order me about when he'd bought me and paid for me; but at present I'm free, and my own mistress. I shall go where I choose—till I'm bought and paid for.'

As she spoke, the young Kabyle's hand played ominously on the hilt of the short steel knife that every mountaineer of the Algerian hills carries always in his girdle as a weapon of offence. For a straw, he would have drawn it and stabbed her to the heart.

Le Marchant observed the gesture with his quick eye, and suggested hastily :

'Ask him if he'll go himself instead, and guide us ? We'll pay him well—give him two francs for conducting us to the summit.'

Your Kabyle never refuses money.

Ahmed assented with delight to the modified proposal, and his fingers ceased toying at once with the handle of his dagger. Le Marchant had done a double stroke of business—appeased his jealousy and gratified his innate love of gain—the two universal mainsprings of action in the poor and passionate Kabyle nature.

They started on their way, the three men alone ; and Meriem gazed long and wistfully after them with a surging sense of unrest and disappointment. Something within her stirred her deeply—something she could never venture to confide to Mouni or to Yamina, her closest inmates. How handsome he looked, in his rough tourist

suit, that delicate young painter with the speaking eyes, beside Ahmed, her betrothed, in his dirty bernouse and his ragged undershirt! How beautifully he talked, and how beautifully he painted, and what strangely divine things he knew how to say to her! Echoes of some unknown world, those sweet fresh words of his! She gazed and gazed, and tears filled her eyes. Her soul revolted with a shock against Ahmed.

Could she really be falling in love—with an infidel?

And then a sudden terror began to seize her heart when they were well on their way, and past hope of overtaking. Should she run after them and warn them of the possible danger? Lalla Khadidja is a steep and precipitous mountain, full of rearing crags and crevasses and gullies. Suppose Ahmed, whom she knew to be jealous of the two young Englishmen, were to push them over on some dangerous ledge, and pretend they had fallen by accident while

climbing! To a Kabyle such treatment of the infidel would seem positively meritorious. The idea turned her sick with alarm and anxiety. She could hardly hold the threads at the upright frame where she sat all day, in the Amine's hut, weaving a many-coloured native *haik* for herself, a mighty labour of the loom, to wear—when she was married to Ahmed. Married to Ahmed! The thought of it sickened her. Till lately it had seemed so natural—and now! She longed for the evening, and the travellers' return. Allah in His goodness protect the Englishmen!

But the two young men, meanwhile, all ignorant of her fears, toiled up the craggy slopes towards the bold summit of the great shadowy mountain. As soon as Meriem was fairly out of hearing, Blake turned round to his companion, and asked in a tone half angry, half disappointed:

'What on earth made you bring this fellow along with us at all? We could

have found our own way to the top very well without him.'

'Why, I was afraid to leave him behind with Meriem,' Le Marchant answered, with a quick glance at the sinister face of their scowling guide. 'In the fellow's present temper, with his blood up, it would take very little to make him stick a knife into her. I know these people; they're quick, and they're revengeful. A word and a stab is the rule with the tribes, especially with women. They kill a woman with far less compunction than you or I would show in treading on a scorpion.'

'He's a brute,' Blake answered, striking the rock with his stick, 'and I'm glad she hates him.'

For some hours they continued their toilsome march, ever up and up, with the wide view opening wider each step before them.

Towards the summit of the mountain, where the rocks were hardest, they came

suddenly on a rearing crag of porphyry, as red as blood, and as hard as granite. It was a beautiful mass, and a beautiful prospect spread out in front of it. Le Marchant sat down at its base in the shade (for, high as they stood, the sun's rays still scorched fiercely), and refreshed himself with a pull at his pocket-flask of whisky and water. On its north side, a cave or rock-shelter ran far into its face. Something on the precipitous wall of the crag within this cave caught Blake's quick eyes as he glanced up at the ferns in the crannied rock with a painter's interest.

'Surely,' he cried, in immense surprise, pointing up with his stick, 'that's an inscription written or carved on the cliff in English letters!'

Le Marchant jumped up and looked at the object hard. It was indeed an inscription, covered thick with moss and lichen, which gather so rapidly in these southern climates, and overgrown by masses of

maidenhair and ceterach; but, by scraping it with a knife, it soon became legible. The letters were firm, and boldly incised, and the legend ran thus, as Le Marchant read it out aloud, in Roman capitals:

'CLARENCE KNYVETT,
SUA IPSIUS MANU FECIT:
ANNO HEJIRÆ
MCCLXIV.'

'What does it all mean?' Blake asked, somewhat timidly, for he hated to display his ignorance of the learned languages before his scientific companion, who seemed to know everything.

'It means,' Le Marchant answered, '"Clarence Knyvett wrote this with his own hand, in the year of the Hejira 1264."'

'What the dickens is the Hejira?' Blake asked again.

'The year of Mahommed's flight to Medina,' Le Marchant answered, with a politely-stifled smile at such ingenuous

ignorance. 'It stands in the East for A.D. with us. It's the date from which the Mussulmans reckon their era.'

'And how long ago was 1264 by this precious date?' Blake asked once more, suspecting it, vaguely, to be somewhere about the days of the Crusaders.

'I don't know exactly—I'm not up in my calendar—but quite recently, I should be inclined to say. Somewhere within the last twenty years or so, at most. The Hejira, you know, was early in the seventh century.'

'Then I'll tell you what,' Blake cried, with a start of surprise, 'Meriem's father must have written that up there!'

'Great wits jump. The very same thought had just occurred to me at the very same moment.'

'I'll copy it in my sketch-book, exactly as it stands,' Blake cried, sitting down again, and pulling out that faithful companion of his wanderings.

And in ten minutes he had produced on paper a rough facsimile of the inscription in its own letters, with an outline of the mass of rock on which it was cut, and the wall-flowers and stocks and maidenhair ferns that sprang out of the crannies in the crag all around it.

'If Meriem's father really wrote it,' he said, as he shut up the book again, 'it'll be a pleasant souvenir to carry away with us of the girl; and, in any case, it's interesting as the record of a previous European visit in such a spot. I thought we were the first who ever burst into that silent cave. Besides, it makes quite a pretty little picture.'

As he spoke, Ahmed signified, with a wave of his hand, that it was time for them to go if they wished to rise and descend again before sunset: and in a few minutes they were fairly at the summit.

It was with a beating heart that Meriem

waited for them to come back again that evening, safe and sound, from the terrors of the treacherous mountain. She watched for them on the path some way out, whither she had gone to meet them, ostensibly for the purpose of driving the goats home to the milking, but really to relieve her own inner anxiety. As she saw them, her bosom gave one great bound. Blake raised his hat with jaunty gallantry, and, opening his book, handed her over the sketch, on purpose to see if the name on the rock roused any latent chord in her uncertain memory. But she looked at it blankly.

'It's pretty,' she said, 'though not so pretty as most of your sketches'—for her stock of English was rapidly increasing under her new teachers. 'I don't see much in it—only a piece of rock and a few small scratches. Are those letters, I wonder? They look like letters; yet they're not the same as one reads in the Koran.'

'What! Can't you read English?' Blake cried in surprise.

It seemed strange to him that one who could speak so well, with the accent and manner of an educated lady, should be unable to spell out one word of our language.

'No,' Meriem answered, with a shake of her head. 'I can't read it. Yusuf meant I should learn to read it in time; but we had no books, and he died so suddenly; and then, of course, it was all forgotten.'

'Well,' Le Marchant interposed, with a fresh test—for he, too, was anxious to try experiments—'the first word—this one here on the face of the rock, you see—is Clarence.'

Meriem's brow gathered suddenly. One moment her memory seemed to strike at last a long-forgotten track. Next instant she cried with a bright flash of recognition:

'Yes, yes; that's it! He wrote it! He

wrote it! I remember now. I remember it well. My father's English name was . . . Clarence Knyvett!'

'Right!' Le Marchant answered, with a gleam of triumph. 'That's just what's written there: Clarence Knyvett, with his own hand, in the year 1264 of the Hejira.'

The girl seized the book rapturously in her hand, and kissed the picture three or four times over.

'It's his!' she cried again, in an ecstasy of joy. 'He wrote it! He wrote it! How good of you to bring it. It was Yusuf! Yusuf!'

He was the only soul on earth she had ever known — save one, perhaps — who fulfilled to the utmost the yearnings of her profound European emotional nature.

As the two men sat alone in their tent that night, while Diego was engaged in pressing the Alpine flowers from Le Mar-

chant's collecting-case, the artist looked up, and said to his friend suddenly:

'Wasn't Knyvett the name of that Girton girl, you remember, who was made Third Classic or something of the sort the other day at Cambridge?'

'Yes,' Le Marchant answered—'a Miss Iris Knyvett. She's a niece, I believe, of Sir Arthur, the rich old General. I thought of that myself, as soon as I saw it. The name's an uncommon one. It's a curious coincidence.'

'How queer it would be,' Blake went on reflectively, 'if this girl were to turn out a member of the same family!'

'It wouldn't at all surprise me,' his friend replied, with profounder meaning. 'Whoever her father was, he must at least have been an educated man. Her English, as far as it goes, you must surely have noticed, is the pure English of ladies and gentlemen.'

'But what a gulf between them!' Blake

exclaimed, with emphasis. 'A girl who can't even read or write—and a Third Classic!'

'She can read the Koran,' Le Marchant answered quickly. 'One language is always the key of another. And, indeed, I think I can see in her something of the same earnest and vigorous qualities that imply, to one who looks below externals, the stuff for making many Third Classics.'

'My dear Le Marchant, you carry things too far! Upon my word, I really believe you're half in love with her!'

Le Marchant paused for a moment before replying.

'It's more to the point to remember,' he said at last, a little constrainedly, 'that she's very much better than half in love with *you*, Blake, and that you've got no right, thinking as you do, to encourage the feeling.'

Blake laughed gaily.

'Oh, it's all right,' he answered, in an

unconcerned tone. 'In the autumn, you know, she's to marry Ahmed.'

To say the truth, the implied imputation of being a lady-killer, even in the case of a mere Kabyle peasant-girl, rather flattered his sensitive artist's soul than otherwise.

CHAPTER X.

RIVAL CLAIMS.

HAROLD KNYVETT, Esquire, of the Board of Trade, and late of Trinity College, Cambridge, lounged lazily back in a leather-covered arm-chair in the comfortable smoking-room of the Cheyne Row Club, Piccadilly.

'Well, yes, my dear fellow,' he remarked with a languid sigh to the sympathetic friend (last left in town) who stood complacently, cigarette in hand, with his back to the empty carved marble fireplace, 'I ought to come in for it, there's no doubt at all in the world about that; and I expect I shall too, for I've laid my plans deep, and I've played my cards warily. Sir Arthur's

a difficult person to deal with, I admit—between you and me and the club clock, as selfish an old pig as ever walked this earth, and pig-headed to match, into the bargain. But allowing for all that—and I've allowed liberally—I've made things modestly certain in the end, I flatter myself; so that one way or the other I'm tolerably sure to turn up trumps, unless the cards miscarry.'

'That's well,' the sympathetic friend responded cheerfully. 'I believe the only other person who has any claim to the estate is your famous cousin, that unspeakable Girton girl, who licked all the men but two in the 'Varsity into a cocked hat—isn't she?'

'Exactly so. The only other person; and to make things doubly sure, I've kept my hand well in meanwhile with *her*, too; so that if the worst should ever come to the worst, I shall simply marry her, you see, and take the property that way—with an encumbrance, unfortunately. For I con-

fess, being by nature a lover of freedom, I should prefer it for my own part wholly unburdened.'

'And suppose she won't have you?' his friend suggested, with a faint smile of doubt.

'Won't have me? My dear sir, at the present day any man on earth may have any girl he chooses if he only takes the trouble to set about the preliminaries properly. Women at present are a drug in the market. Girls without money you may have for the asking; girls with money, or with expectations of money, you may have by approaching them in a proper spirit from the side of the emotions. *Il faut leur faire la cour, bien entendu*—and that, I admit, is a degrading mode of exercise—but when the money can be had on no other condition, the wise man will not disdain even that last unpleasant one. He will stoop to conquer; and then, having once secured what are popularly known as the girl's

affections, he'll take care that the settlements, which form the kernel of the whole transaction, should not be drawn up too stringently in the lady's favour. Those are my sentiments on the matrimonial position.' And Harold Knyvett, having thus delivered himself of his social views, rose from his chair with the resolute manner of a man who knows his own mind to the bottom, and buried his hands deep in his trousers-pockets.

'However,' he went on, after a brief pause, during part of which he had been engaged in selecting a really good cigar with deliberate care from the box a club-servant had brought in to his order, 'I don't anticipate any such misfortune as that, I'm happy to say. I've very little doubt Sir Arthur, selfish pig though he is, will do the right thing in the end before he kicks the bucket. I rejoice to say he's a man with a conscience. You see, when he first came into the property, he made a will,

a most disgusting will, which he left with his solicitors, and the contents of which are perfectly well known to me, through the kind intervention of Sir Arthur's valet—as a principle in life, always cultivate your rich uncle's valet; it can do you no harm, and may be of infinite use to you; a guinea or two bestowed in judicious tips, in that particular quarter, may be regarded in the light of a lucrative long investment.'

'A *quid pro quo*,' his friend suggested jocosely, emphasising the 'quid' with a facetious stress, after the manner of that most objectionable animal, the common punster.

Harold Knyvett winced, but he smiled for all that, or pretended to smile. Always smile when you see it's expected of you. As a man of taste, he detested puns, especially old ones; but native politeness, of which he possessed a large stock — the servile politeness of all mean natures—made him careful to laugh at them, however out-

rageous or however antiquated. 'Precisely so,' he made answer. 'A *quid pro quo*,' without the emphasis. 'Well, by this beastly will, he gives and bequeaths his landed estate and his entire fortune, save and except his own paltry savings from his military pay, to my cousin, the root-grubber, the Greek root-grubber, on no better ground, if you please, than just because my grandfather the Admiral, out of the pure vindictiveness of his nasty temper, desired him, by implication, so to leave it. My grandfather, you know—a most unnatural person—had a grudge against my father, his own youngest son, and expressly excluded him, by the terms of his will, from all reversionary interest in the property.'

'Bad-blooded old gentleman!' the sympathetic listener piously ejaculated.

'Extremely,' Harold went on, with a smile that showed his even row of blue transparent teeth. 'A worse-blooded old gentleman, indeed, never lived, for, not

only did he cut off my father with a shilling, an act which I could, perhaps, have endured with equanimity, but he cut me too out of all benefit of succession—me, a babe unborn (at the time I am speaking of), who had never done anything on earth, good or bad, to offend him. Such mean vindictiveness positively disgusts me. But the will was badly drawn up, it appears, and so the wicked old man, by his own mistake, made the grievous error of leaving Sir Arthur—alone, of all his sons—through an omitted phrase, the power of appointment. Now, Sir Arthur, at the time he came into the property, had seen practically nothing of either my cousin Iris, the root-grubber, or myself—been away in India half his life, you see, and knew neither *my* good points nor *her* weak ones. The consequence was, influenced by the bad old man's expressed wishes, he drew up a will at once—the ill-advised will I've already described to you—cutting me off with a few wretched

thousands of personal estate, but leaving the bulk of the landed property absolutely to Iris.'

'And that will he means to stick to?' the sympathetic listener inquired politely.

'I hope not,' Harold Knyvett replied, with a glance at his ash. 'You see, the other side played their cards badly. This girl Iris has a meddling old busybody of an uncle: you know him by name—Whitmarsh, Q.C., the man who muddles all the famous probate cases. Well, this old fool of a man Whitmarsh, ignorant of the fact that Sir Arthur had made such a will already, began to bully and badger my uncle in his vulgar fashion, by insinuating to him privately that he'd better not leave the property to me, or else he'd find a good case made out against him on the strength of the Admiral's express disapprobation. Naturally, that put Sir Arthur's back up. Nobody, and especially not a peppery old General who's served more than half his

life in India, likes to have it dictated to him by rank outsiders what disposition he's to make of his own money. I was wiser than that. I didn't try bullying; I tried soft sawder. I approached Sir Arthur, as I approach the young woman, from the side of the affections. Then Iris herself, again, instead of assiduously captivating the old gentleman, as any girl with a grain of common-sense would, of course, have tried to do, positively neglected him for something she calls the higher culture, and, immersed in her Hellenic agricultural operations, dug roots exclusively, when she might rather have been sedulously watering and nursing her relations with Sir Arthur.'

'Thought more of her Odyssey than of her uncle, I suppose. That was lucky for you, Knyvett; for, by Jove! she's a pretty girl, you know, and agreeable into the bargain. If she'd chosen to make up to him, I expect your chances would have been shaky.'

'You say the truth, my dear boy. It *was* lucky for me. I admit it frankly. But I, who always play my cards carefully, have taken great pains to eliminate luck. I've visited the old gentleman every blessed year with recurrent regularity at his summer quarters, at Aix-les-Bains, much to my own personal discomfort, for he's a selfish old epicure, and I hate selfishness; but the end, of course, justifies the means; and I think I've made it pretty safe by this time that he either has drawn up, or is about to draw up, a new and more sensible will in my favour. As a matter of conscience, he's sure to see to it. I shall snap my fingers then at the man Whitmarsh. And, indeed, it'd be a pity, when one comes to think of it, that a Quixotic, impulsive girl like Iris should have the sole management of all that splendid property. She's like all the learned ladies; she's quite unpractical. I met her last week at a garden-party at Staines (where I was very attentive to

her, of course, just to keep my hand in); and what do you think the girl actually told me? She's going to train as a hospital nurse. Her uncle, old Whitmarsh —who, though a meddling old fool, is a man of the world, one can't deny—did his best to dissuade her from it; but she wouldn't be dissuaded. She wanted to do some good in her generation! Utopian, quite! It'd never do for her to come into the property!'

'If I were you,' the sympathetic friend responded suggestively, 'I'd make haste all the same to assure myself as a fact that Sir Arthur had really altered the will. Testamentary dispositions are ticklish things. Men put them off so, from day to day, especially at his time of life, you know. He might die any morning, out of pure mischief, and leave you in the lurch and your cousin in clover.'

'That contingency, unfortunately,' Harold replied, with a sigh, 'it's impossible for

the wisest of men to guard against. But I've hedged, even so; I've made my book cautiously. It occurred to me to pay marked attention beforehand to my cousin Iris, who's a pretty girl, after all, and not insensible, I fancy, in spite of her Aristotle, to a man's advances; and I mean to get up an informal engagement with her, of a non-committing character; so that if by accident she should come into the money (which heaven forbid), I can annex the property that way, girl and all included; and if, on the other hand, all goes well, I can shuffle out of it quietly by letting the thing die a natural death, and come into the estate wholly unencumbered.'

'That's neat and cute of you,' his hearer responded, a little dubiously; 'but perhaps a trifle too sharp for most men's fancy.'

Harold Knyvett's reply was suddenly cut short by the entry of a boy in buttons with a telegram. 'For you, sir,' he said, handing

him the flimsy pink paper on a tray. Harold took it and tore open the envelope carelessly. An invitation for a day on the moors, no doubt; or an urgent request from the editor of the *Piccadilly Review* for a hasty notice of that forthcoming work of Kekewich's on the 'Slavonic Element in the Balkan Peninsula.'

As he read it, his face turned white with mingled disappointment, rage, and impotence.

'What's up?' his friend asked, scenting failure on the breeze.

'Why, this,' Harold answered, as he handed him the trumpery little crumpled scrap of Government economy. 'From my uncle's valet. The fruit of my investment.'

The friend read it mechanically aloud :

'Sir Arthur died at two this afternoon, at his residence at Aix, quite suddenly, of *angina pectoris*. I have searched his papers up and down, but can find no

trace of any other will than the one now in the hands of his solicitors.

'Your obedient servant,

'GILBERT MONTGOMERY.'

A crushing blow! The cards had failed him!

It was a minute or two before Harold Knyvett recovered his usual presence of mind after that deadly reverse. Dead, and with no other will yet made! Dead, with no chance of influencing his decision! Dead, before he had even proposed to Iris! To ask her now would be too open and unblushing a confession of fortune-hunting. Procrastination had lost him both chances at once—his uncle's procrastination in the one case, his own in the other. If only he had proposed a week since at that garden-party at Staines! Fool, fool that he was to let the opportunity slip idly by him!

It was only for a moment, however. Next minute, strategy had resumed the command. Vain regret was very little in

Harold Knyvett's line. Like a strong man, he nerved himself after his defeat, and proceeded to bring up his reserves for action. He looked at his watch. The hand was on the very nick of five. News of Sir Arthur's death wouldn't get into even the last edition of this evening's papers. Iris would therefore not probably hear of it till to-morrow morning. No more procrastination; no more delay. The last moment for the forlorn hope had now arrived. If he took his pretty cousin by storm to-night, all might yet be well, and the estate might be secured, even though burdened with the undesirable encumbrance.

Harold Knyvett was not a marrying man; but if the worst came to the worst, he reflected with a sigh, a man might marry a plainer girl than his cousin Iris.

He had an engagement with his superior in the office at seven, to dine at his club, worse luck, and he dared not neglect it. Cautious before all things, Harold Knyvett

would never throw away the substance for the shadow. The office was a certainty; Iris was a chance. No gambler he; he would stick to his engagement. But he could go away early, thank heaven—say at 9.30, or thereabouts (pleading an At Home)—and be up at his aunt's before the clock struck ten. Filled with the scheme, he rushed to the door and hailed in all haste a passing hansom. It took him to his chambers in less than ten minutes. There he sat down at his old oak desk and wrote at full speed two hurried letters. The first was to the heiress: 'A most judicious step,' he said to himself, with a chuckle.

'My dear Iris,

'I am very particularly anxious to see you this evening about ten o'clock on a matter of some serious importance to both of us alike. You are always kindness itself to me, I know. May I ask you, if possible, as the best and sweetest of cousins, not to go out at all to-night, or, in case you have

any engagement for the evening, to come home again early, so that I may manage to have ten minutes' talk with you alone? I know you'll do this for me, like a dear good girl. With much love, in breathless haste,

'Your very affectionate cousin,

'HAROLD.'

The second was a hasty note to his solicitor.

'DEAR HARDY,

'The old man has popped off the hooks this afternoon at Aix, and, as far as I can make out, has neglected to draw up any other will than the one I told you of. This is beastly. We must resist all probate of the existing document to the utmost of our power. I'll see you upon the subject to-morrow morning. Meanwhile, look over my grandfather's will—you have a copy, I believe—and take all necessary steps immediately, to prevent a surprise by the other party.

'Yours, in hot haste,

'HAROLD KNYVETT.'

Then, being nothing if not a methodical man, Mr. Harold Knyvett proceeded to put both letters, out of pure force of habit, to copy in his copying press—the solicitor's first, and Iris's afterwards. A copy is always a handy thing ; you can produce it when necessary, and suppress it when inconvenient. That done, he rang the bell for his servant.

'Send those at once to their addresses by a commissionaire,' he said abruptly. 'Let him take a cab. At Miss Knyvett's I should like him to wait for an answer.'

CHAPTER XI.

GOOD NEWS FROM AIX.

About the same time, that identical afternoon, Uncle Tom arrived by hansom, very red-faced, at Mrs. Knyvett's house in West Kensington. Great trepidation possessed his soul, and an open telegram fluttered ostentatiously in his left hand. 'Calm yourself, my dear,' he remarked, with sundry puffs and blows, to Iris, who, indeed, had only just come in from tennis, and seemed to the outward eye of a mere casual observer as calm as any Third Classic ought always to be; 'don't be too agitated, there's nothing to alarm you. I've brought you news—most important news. Your uncle, Sir

Arthur, died at Aix-les-Bains at two this afternoon, of *angina pectoris*.'

'Well, really, Uncle Tom,' Iris answered, with a smile, throwing her pretty little arms caressingly around him, 'I suppose, of course, I ought to be awfully sorry ; he's papa's brother, and all that sort of thing ; but, as a matter of fact, I hardly remember seeing him when I was quite a baby, and having always regarded him only as one of the family portraits, I don't feel as if I could screw up even a conventional tear now to lament his demise with.'

'Sorry !' Uncle Tom exclaimed, in a fervour of astonishment. 'Why, you ought to be delighted! overjoyed ! irrepressible! Sorry at coming into six thousand a year, indeed! Why, the girl's gone cracked! I'll trouble you for her calmness! Sorry, indeed! Sorry!'

At the words, Mrs. Knyvett, who was standing by, fell back in her chair, with her main aquiline feature pointed straight

towards the rose in the centre of the ceiling, and indulged parenthetically in a loud fit of mingled hysterical sobs and laughter. If Iris was insensible to her own good fortune, Mrs. Knyvett, at least, as an irreproachable British mother, felt bound to rise vicariously on her account to the height of the situation. But as soon as this little interruption had been partially composed, according to due precedent, by the application of sal volatile and eau de Cologne, Uncle Tom was enabled to proceed more systematically with his exposition of the existing crisis.

'Now calm yourself, my dear,' the fat little old gentleman began again, with much energy, being, in fact, very far from calm himself, and therefore, like many other people in the same circumstances, particularly anxious to quiet the nerves of other people. 'Here's the telegram I've just received from Savoy :

'"Sir Arthur died at two this afternoon, a his residence at Aix, quite suddenly, of

angina pectoris. I have searched his papers up and down, but can find no trace of any other will than the one now in the hands of his solicitor.

'"Your obedient servant,

'"GILBERT MONTGOMERY."'

It was word for word the self-same telegram that Harold Knyvett had received at the Cheyne Row Club; but of that little peculiarity in its duplicate form Uncle Tom, of course, was as yet unaware.

'He's a treasure, that valet,' he murmured to himself, with a hug of delight. 'Behaved most admirably. Never expended ten pounds in my life to better advantage!'

'But why does he telegraph to you, uncle dear?' Iris asked, much puzzled.

'Well, the fact is, my child,' the old barrister answered, with a somewhat shamefaced look, for he felt he must confess the one sin of an otherwise blameless life openly, 'in any other case I wouldn't have descended to obtaining information from any other

man's servants, by fair means or foul; but in dealing with a scoundrel of the calibre and metal of Harold Knyvett——'

'Uncle!' Iris cried, firing up, 'you've no right to prejudge him! You've no right to speak so of any of my relations! You've no right to call my cousin a scoundrel.'

'Exactly so, my dear,' the old man went on, in a pleased tone. 'I like you none the worse for withstanding me to my face, as Paul did somebody, and sticking up for your relative, though he does happen to be a sneak and a cur and a bully; but, at any rate, in dealing with a claim like his (if that phrase will satisfy you), I thought it best to ensure beforehand prior and exclusive information of my own from your uncle's body-servant; so that the moment Sir Arthur was comfortably dead, and past the possibility of meddling with his last will and testament, we might secure ourselves at once against Harold's machinations. That fellow'd stick at nothing, I can tell you, my child. He's

a bad lot. Why, he'd forge a will, I know, if he saw no other way of getting what he wanted, as soon as look at you.'

'Uncle!' Iris exclaimed again severely; and the old gentleman immediately assumed a penitent attitude.

'Well, he's dead, anyhow,' Uncle Tom went on, with professional glee; 'and it's pretty sure now he's made no will but the one we know about. So, Iris, the position amounts to this: you're the mistress of six thousand a year—a great fortune, my dear! A very great fortune!'

'I hope I may be able to spend it wisely for the good of the world,' Iris answered, with a sigh.

She was a trifle pale, but otherwise seemed about as calm as usual. Her calmness irritated Mrs. Knyvett inexpressibly.

'For goodness' sake, Iris!' she exclaimed, getting up as though she'd like to shake her, 'do laugh, or cry, or scream, or do something just to show you understand the

importance of your position. I never in my life knew such a girl as you are. When that Cambridge local or something was going to be announced the other day, you were as white as death and as agitated as—as a jelly ; and now that you've come into six thousand a year you're as calm over your good fortune as if six thousand a year were a kind of accident that dropped in upon one daily !'

'But the examination was so much more important to *me*,' Iris answered gently, stroking her mother's hair, to prevent another sudden outburst of sobbing and laughing. 'I did that myself, you see, by my own exertions ; whereas this is a sort of adventitious external circumstance. It's not what one *has*, so much as what one *is*, that matters. . . . Besides, the question's really this : oughtn't Harold to have at least as much as I have ?'

'God bless my soul! why?' Uncle Tom exclaimed, in extreme astonishment.

'Because, you know, we were both equally related to Sir Arthur by birth; and I should have felt it an injustice myself if Sir Arthur had left everything he had to Harold, and nothing to me. It would be a manifest inequality; and, as Aristotle says, in the "Nicomachean Ethics," equality is justice.'

'But the law, my child!' Uncle Tom exclaimed aghast—'the law of the land—the law allows it. "Perfect freedom of testamentary disposition," Blackstone remarks, "is the keystone of the English law of bequest and inheritance."'

'It may be the law,' Iris made answer unabashed; 'but is it right? is it justice?'

Uncle Tom's hair stood on end with alarm at the heretical question. A lawyer who had spent the best part of his life in pleading probate cases to be set such a problem!

'They're the same thing, my dear,' he made answer, gasping—'the self-same thing under two different aspects. The law defines and expresses clearly what is right and

proper for a man to do in each particular instance; it lays down the strict principles of individual justice.'

'Herbert Spencer thinks,' the Third Classic went on, undismayed by his evident outburst of horror, 'that law is merely the brute expression of the will of a real or practical majority—generally a dead majority: often an ignorant and prejudiced mediæval majority. He holds, in fact, that law in its essence——'

'Heaven bless the girl!' Uncle Tom exclaimed, stopping both his ears with his hands vigorously. 'If she isn't going to lecture me on Political Economy! Why, haven't I already explained to you, miss, that you may do anything on earth with me, except two things—bandage my legs, and give me lectures on Political Economy? I desire to live and die a humble Christian, in complete ignorance of that hard-hearted science. Let's return to our muttons. Let me see, where were we?'

'I was saying,' Iris went on, in her quiet firm way, 'that I thought I ought to share this fortune with Harold, who seems to me to have quite equal claims to it with myself, uncle.'

Uncle Tom's wrath seethed up rapidly to boiling-point. 'With Harold!' he cried out in an agony of disgust. 'With that sneak! with that cur! with that incarnation of selfishness! Upon my soul, my dear, if you were to do such a quixotic thing as that, as long as I lived I should never speak another word to you.'

'I should be very sorry for that,' Iris answered with a smile—'at least, if I believed it; more sorry than for anything else I could think of on earth; for I love you dearly; but if I thought it right, whether you meant it or not, I should have to do it.'

'Iris!' her mother exclaimed, with a severe curve of the principal feature, 'how on earth can you talk in such a way to your uncle—and after his unremitting kindness to you always!'

'We must first of all obey our consciences, mother,' Iris replied gravely. '*Fiat justitia*, you know, *ruat cœlum*.'

What end this discussion of first principles might have reached between disputants so utterly without common premisses it would be hard to say, had not a diversion been suddenly effected by the entrance of the maid with a note for Miss Knyvett. 'And the messenger's waiting in an 'ansom for the answer, miss.'

Iris read it through with some slight misgiving.

'From Harold,' she said shortly, and handed it to her uncle.

The barrister drew a long breath as he glanced at it angrily.

'Too affectionate by half!' he cried. '"The best and sweetest of cousins!" "In breathless haste!" He's hedging, now. He's got wind of this, too, and he's going to propose to you. The scamp! the skunk! the disgusting vermin!'

Iris was too charitable to believe it true without stronger evidence.

'We must wait and see,' she said: 'I don't want to prejudge him.'

'It's true,' Uncle Tom went on, with rising indignation: 'I see through the car. There's been double-dealing here. That scoundrel of a valet has taken pay from both of us alike, and sent us both an identical telegram. Harold knows he's run off without appeal, and he wants to propose to you before you get the news and know what he's living at.'

'I hope not,' Iris cried, flushing up with shame at the mere suggestion.

Uncle Tom was turning over the letter curiously.

'Why, God bless my soul!' he exclaimed with a start, 'what's this upon the fly-leaf? What extraordinary marks! They look for all the world like the reverse of a letter. And he sat down to examine them with the close and patient scrutiny of an old hand in the Probate and Divorce Division.

CHAPTER XII.

RELENTED.

At ten o'clock, as Iris fingered the piano in the drawing-room alone (by special arrangement), a ran-tan at the door, loud but decorous, announced her cousin Harold's arrival. Iris's heart beat quickly for a minute; it was an ordeal to have to see him on such an errand alone, but she had made her mind up to learn the whole truth, cost what it might, and she would go through with it now to the bitter end at all hazards. A frail little thing on the bodily side, she was by no means wanting in moral courage; and here was an opportunity, a baneful opportunity, all ready to hand for testing her self-confidence.

As for Harold, he came up in evening dress and in excellent spirits; after all, it was only a temporary check; he would marry the fortune, if he couldn't inherit it. Any man nowadays can select his girl, and make tolerably sure of her, with a little attention! It's only a matter of casting your fly well. He wore a cream-coloured rose, with a maidenhair, in his button-hole; his shirt front was faultless, and his white tie of the most immaculate neatness. Women attach some importance to these trifles, you know, even though they happen to be Third Classics; and Harold Knyvett was well aware that his teeth were pearly, and his eyes cold blue, and his moustache the envy of the entire Civil Service. He entered with a look intended to be almost rapturous.

'How good of you, Iris!' he cried, as he kissed her, though his cousin shrank away somewhat timidly from that doubtful kiss. 'I see you understood me! That was ever

so nice of you. And alone, too! This is more than I could have asked! What rare good fortune! I hardly expected to find you alone here.'

'Mamma had a headache,' Iris answered with truth, for the shock and the hysteria had proved too much for the possessor of the aristocratic feature; 'so she went to bed early. What did you want to see me about, Harold? Has anything unusual turned up since I saw you?'

'Nothing unusual, dearest,' Harold went on, leaning forward, and looking profoundly in the direction of her averted eyes; 'but a feeling I have long felt growing within me has come to a head at last; and this afternoon it broke over me suddenly, like a flash of inspiration, that I could no longer put off opening my whole heart to you.'

Iris's hand trembled violently. She hated herself, she was so horribly guilty; it was such a wicked duplicity to let him go on—she, who knew all the facts already.

Yet she would play out the comedy to its natural close, come what might of it, for the sake of certainty. Harold noted her agitation, and misread its meaning.

'I've nobbled her,' he thought to himself, with a triumphant smile. 'See how her hand trembles! But I'll play her gracefully a little longer. It's unsportsmanlike to gaff your fish too hastily.'

So he went on once more, in a soft, low tone, taking her hand, half unresisted, in his own, and playing with it tenderly, while Iris still kept her face studiously averted.

'Iris, one thing that made me think more particularly of this to-day is my strong desire there should be no shadow of mercenary feeling on either side between you and me, whose interests should be so identical in all things. Uncle Arthur's still alive. While he lives, neither of us knows to which of the two, or in what proportion, the dear old gentleman will leave his money. Now, I felt it borne in upon me with a

sudden impulse this afternoon that it would be better if, before either of us was thus put in a position of superiority, so to speak, in worldly goods over the other, we were to let our hearts' secret out mutually. And for that I've come to see you to-night. . . . Iris, I love you—I've always loved you, of course ; but of late I've learnt what my love meant. Dare I hope, darling ?' and he raised her hand tentatively, but with ardour, towards his thin lips, and was about to print upon it what seemed to him the appropriate warm kiss of a devoted lover.

Iris, however, could stand the strain of this false position no longer. Withdrawing her hand suddenly from his with a violent start, she took slowly from her pocket a note in his hand, and began to read some pencilled words, interspersed with ink, on the fly-leaf of the letter. She spoke them out with a trembling voice, but with great clearness, to this unexpected purport :

'DEAR HARDY,

'The old man has popped off the hooks this afternoon at Aix, and, as far as I can make out——'

She had got no further when Harold, red as fire, with a sudden dart forward, tried to seize the compromising document from her hand ; but Iris was too quick for him, and too relentless as well. She dashed the letter with one hand behind her back, then advancing to the gas, and facing him full, she held it up before him, and read to the very last line his note to his solicitor. She would let him see she understood to the full the whole depth and breadth of his unmanly baseness.

Harold Knyvett, well-bred sneak as he was, stood and listened shamefaced, now white as a curd. What could all this mean ? What error had he committed ? He knew he hadn't blundered the elementary blunder of putting the wrong letter by mistake into Iris's envelope. His good

business habits and his clock-work accuracy sufficed to save him from such a puerile scholar's mate from a woman as that; for he always subscribed each letter to its recipient at the bottom of the page with antique punctiliousness, and always took care to look, as he folded them, that subscription and superscription tallied exactly. All the more, therefore, was he nonplussed to understand how Iris had got hold of his note to Hardy. Could the fellow have betrayed him? Impossible! Impossible! But he stood there, with his face all livid to behold, and his eyes fixed hard upon the pattern of the carpet, till Iris had completed to the very last word her righteous torture.

'What does this mean, Iris?' he asked angrily, as she folded it up with a smile, and replaced it in the envelope.

'It means,' Iris answered, handing him over the note, now she had quite finished it, with ironical courtesy, '. . . that you use too thick and too black a copying ink. I

advise you in future, Harold, to employ some thinner kind if you wish to prevent a recurrence of this unfortunate exposure.'

She was white as a sheet herself, but righteous indignation bore her through. The man should know he was detected and unmasked ; he should writhe for his meanness, whatever it cost her.

Harold took the note from her hand and gazed at it mechanically. He saw now at a glance the source of all these woes. The flyleaf of Iris's letter, laid downward in the copying-book, had taken a faint and half-illegible impression of his note to Hardy from the wet page opposite. In any other hands than Thomas Kynnersley Whitmarsh's, those loose, sprawling daubs on the blank sheet would no doubt have meant rather less than nothing. But the distinguished Q.C. and great authority on probate cases had seen too many strange documents and forgeries in his time not to have become an adept in handwriting and all that apper-

tained to it. No expert was sharper on a stroke or a dot than he; the crossing of a 't' was enough to convict a man of sin before his scrutinizing spectacles. By holding up the page to the light of the gas, he had been able to supply with dexterous pencil-strokes the missing portions of each word or letter, and to reconstruct, entire, the compromising epistle to Mr. Harold's solicitor. So skilfully had he built it all up, indeed, that even Iris herself could no longer doubt her cousin's meanness, nor could Harold, when confronted with his own handiwork, thus unexpectedly reproduced, venture to deny or explain away to her face his authorship of the letter.

The baffled schemer looked at Iris with cynical coldness. He had played his cards altogether too well.

'Then it's all up,' he said—for he knew when he was beaten; 'it's all up, I suppose, between us?'

'Yes, it's all up,' Iris answered coldly;

'and so far as I am concerned, Harold Knyvett, I do not any further desire the honour of your acquaintance. I tried to believe in you as long as I could, though I never liked you, and I never cared for you; I can believe in you no longer, and I wish to see no more of you.'

Harold looked across at her with a curl on his lip.

'Your new-come fortune has made you proud in a hurry,' he sneered out angrily. 'But don't be too sure about it yet, my lady. Remember, Sir Arthur's title had a flaw in it from the first. What he bequeathed to you was, perhaps, from the very beginning, not his to bequeath you.'

'I'm not concerned at present about Sir Arthur's title,' Iris answered, cold as ice, and trembling violently, but still self-possessed; 'I'm concerned only about your own shameful and cynical duplicity.'

'Ah, that's all very well for you to say

just now,' Harold went on, taunting her, 'while you're angry at a slight to your personal pretensions; but you won't think so by-and-by, you know, when you come to look into it. There *is* a flaw, and, whether you like it or not, you've got to face it. Sir Arthur knew it, and you'd better know it, too, if you're really and truly Sir Arthur's inheritor. The old gentleman came into the property himself on the strength of affidavits to the effect that his second brother, Clarence, had predeceased his eldest brother Alexander, having been killed in action in crushing a native insurrection in Algeria, in or about the year 1868, if I remember rightly. The Courts would have accepted the affidavits, perhaps, if the claim had been opposed, and perhaps they wouldn't. But as no opposition was raised, administration was granted, and Sir Arthur was allowed to succeed quietly. However, there was a flaw in the evidence for all that. And I'll tell you the

flaw, to let you see how little I'm afraid of you. Clarence Knyvett's body was never recovered, or never identified. He was only missing, not certainly killed. And as he had run away from England to avoid serious unpleasantness in the matter of a criminal charge preferred against him by his own father, and as he was serving in the French army, under an assumed name, to avoid detection, the question of identification was by no means an easy one. Sir Arthur went over to Algiers to settle it, to be sure, and satisfied himself (as, indeed, he had every reason to be easily satisfied) that Clarence Knyvett had died, in fact, at the date assigned. But many soldiers of his old regiment did not believe it. They thought he'd sneaked off, and hidden among the natives. And if Clarence Knyvett's now alive, he's the owner of the property; and if he's dead, dying at a later date than Alexander, his children, if any, and not *you*, are the inheritors of his estate!'

As he spoke, Iris faced him with cold contempt in every line of her face.

'Is that all you have to tell me?' she asked severely, as soon as he had finished.

'No,' Harold answered, losing his head with rage, 'that's not all. I've something more to tell you. You won't like to hear it, but I'll tell you for all that. One bad turn deserves another. Unless a later will of Sir Arthur's turns up, leaving the property in a more equitable manner—as it may do any day—I shall never rest satisfied till I've hunted up Clarence Knyvett, his heirs and representatives, and turned you out of the doubtful inheritance to which you've probably no real title. So now you know what you've got to reckon with.'

'And if another will *does* turn up,' Iris rejoined quietly, though with ashy lips, 'leaving the property entirely to you, you'll accept Sir Arthur's claims without hesitation, and let Uncle Clarence's heirs, if he

ever had any, go without the inheritance to which they have probably the best title! . . . . Is that what you mean? . . . . Harold, you may go!' And, rising to her full height, she pointed to the door. 'You had only one friend in your own family,' she said, 'and you've succeeded to-night in turning her against you.'

Harold took up his hat, and went. On the landing he paused.

'Remember,' he called back, with a parting shot, 'I'll not rest till I've brought the rightful heirs to light against you.'

Then he walked down the stairs, and emerged, all on fire, into the gaslit streets of fog-bound Kensington.

As soon as he felt the fresh air on his brow, however, he recognised with a rush how serious a mistake he had committed in his anger. Another will *might* turn up any day—a sensible will in his own favour—and then they would have this handle of the flaw in the title to use against him. Or

if another will did *not* turn up—well, it was absurd to think that a man of education and technical skill like himself—a man of resource and energy and wit—a man, above all, possessed of the precious and invaluable quality of unscrupulousness—should let himself be diddled out of a splendid estate by a pack of women, for no better reason than just because a piece of dirty paper with a few names scratched upon it was not duly forthcoming from Sir Arthur's davenport. It's easy enough, of course, to copy a signature: any fool can do that. Sir Arthur *ought* to have altered that will; he *meant* to alter it; he all but *did* alter it. How perfectly simple to—well, to alter it posthumously for the dilatory old man, in accordance with his own obvious and expressed intentions!

Forgery, they call it, in the coarse, blunt dialect of the Probate and Divorce Division.

But in that case, as things stood, he had put a weapon into Iris's hands which she

might possibly be inclined to use against him. Well, now that the matter had gone so far wrong, the best way in the end would perhaps be to let them prove the existing will, which would commit them to acceptance of Sir Arthur's claim; and after that, whenever the—the new hypothetical will turned up (and it *should* turn up; on that he was decided), they would find it less easy to fight the matter against him. Meanwhile, to annoy them, he'd hunt up his uncle Clarence's business, too. The man very likely was still alive. Any weapon's good enough to use against an enemy.

An enemy! And yet, what a splendid creature that girl was, after all! He had never admired her so much in his life before as when she confronted him like a wild-cat in her anger to-night. That righteous indignation became her magnificently. By Jove, she was grand! What a fool he'd been not to marry her long ago! Why,

let alone the fortune, she was a girl any man might be proud to marry for her own sake any day—if he meant marrying. She was so pretty, so clever, and had such funds of character! And he'd noticed the other afternoon, as they drove back from Staines in a friend's open carriage, she was the only woman that ever lived who held her parasol of deliberate purpose at such an angle as not entirely to shut out the view of all surrounding objects from her male companion.

A splendid creature, and a most undoubted heiress. But, as a woman alone, well worth the sacrifice.

He wished to goodness, now, indeed, he'd married her off-hand a couple of years since. Nay, more, in his own cold, selfish way, he awoke with a start to the solemn fact that he wanted that woman. As far as was possible to such a nature as his, he was in love with Iris—and he had only just that very evening discovered it.

CHAPTER XIII.

IRIS STRIKES.

'UNCLE,' Iris said, when she talked it over with the old barrister in the dining-room next morning, 'after all that happened last night, do you know, I'm not perhaps quite so anxious as I was to share Uncle Arthur's fortune with Harold.'

'God bless the girl!' Uncle Tom cried, in mock horror. 'What on earth does she mean now? You were both equally related to Sir Arthur by birth, weren't you? and, as Aristotle says, equality is justice.'

Iris blushed slightly. It was too cruel of him thus to bring up her own words in judgment against her.

'But he behaved so disgracefully, so

abominably, last night,' she said apologetically. 'He doesn't deserve it.'

'It's a great comfort to me to see,' Uncle Tom responded, with a cheerful blink, 'that going to Girton and coming out Third Classic still leaves a girl essentially a woman at heart for all that. No woman that ever lived, whether she'd read Aristotle or not, cares or ever cared one farthing yet about abstract justice. What women care about is the satisfaction of their own personal emotions and feelings. I'm glad to see, my dear, that in this respect you're no better than the rest. "He ought by rights to have half this property, of course," you say in effect; "but as I see he's a sneak and a mean-spirited cur, I don't think I'll bother about giving him his fair share of it." Very womanly and very right. That, I take it, my child, is about the long and the short of your argument.'

Iris laughed.

'Perhaps so,' she replied. 'But anyhow,

Uncle Tom, after what he did and said last night, I find my desire to do him strict justice has considerably abated.'

So, Aristotle to the contrary notwithstanding, Uncle Tom was permitted vicariously to prove Sir Arthur's will in due course — Iris herself being named sole executrix—and to take all necessary steps for her succession to the landed property. As soon as all the legal arrangements were finally completed, Iris once more had a great consultation to make with her guardian, guide, philosopher, and friend. She had given up the hospital nurse fad, of course, for the present, as inconsistent with her existing position as a great heiress; but she had another mine to explode upon poor Uncle Tom now, and once more a mine due to an acute attack of that most undesirable and inconvenient mental disease, conscience.

'Now I want to know, Uncle Tom,' the heiress and Third Classic said persuasively,

cornering him at bay in an easy-chair in Mrs. Knyvett's little drawing-room at Kensington (for they had not yet taken possession of the projected mansion in Lowndes Square), 'is there any truth, or is there not, in that story of Harold's about Uncle Clarence's supposed disappearance?'

The distinguished Q.C. shuffled awkwardly in his seat. For the first time in his life he began faintly to realize the feelings of an unwilling witness under his own searching cross-examination.

'A cock-and-bull story!' he said at last evasively. 'Just said to frighten you. If I were you, Iris, I'd think no more about it.'

'But *is* there any truth in it, uncle?' Iris persisted, with quiet emphasis, as the distinguished Q.C. himself would have done in the same case, if only he had got his own double safely lodged in front of him in that amateur witness-box.

'Bless my soul!' Uncle Tom replied, stroking her hair gently to create a diver-

sion, 'what a persistent cross-examiner the girl is, to be sure! If I tell you no, you'll not believe me, and if I tell you yes, you'll want to go running over Europe, Asia, Africa, and America, not to speak of the islands of the Pacific Ocean, in search of Clarence Knyvett, his heirs, or executors.'

'Then there *is* some truth in it,' Iris went on, with one hand laid persuasively on her uncle's arm.

'As much truth as a man like your cousin Harold can speak, I suppose,' the old man answered, with a gasp, as who should at last resolve to have an aching tooth drawn, for he felt sure she must get it all out of him now. 'The fact is, my dear, your uncle Clarence's death, like Jeames De la Pluche's birth, is "wrop in mystery." He left England under a cloud. He was a gay young soldier, always getting into scrapes, and always spending more than he'd got, and skulking in disgrace, and compounding with his creditors. It's

supposed, though I don't know anything about it for certain, that he forged, or tried to forge, your grandfather's name to sundry acceptances. It's further supposed that this came at last to your grandfather's knowledge, and that your grandfather, being, like Moses, an austere man, threatened to expose the whole business. So Clarence, it is believed, like the great Orion, went sloping slowly to the West. Anyhow, one fine morning the news got wind that your uncle was missing; and from that day to this he has been consistently missed, and never turned up again.'

'But what was that about his enlisting in the French army?' Iris asked, with a caress, as the old man paused.

'Well, nothing was known about that, my dear, during your uncle Alexander's life,' Uncle Tom went on, like a man from whom evidence is extorted by rack and thumb-screw; 'we thought, indeed, he'd gone to America. But as soon as Sir

Arthur inherited the property, it became necessary to find proof of Clarence's death, whether Clarence was dead or living; so Sir Arthur, tracking him gradually from France, went over to Algiers in the end to find it. It was through that, in fact, that he settled down first at Sidi Aia. Well, this was the result of Sir Arthur's investigation.' And here Uncle Tom refreshed his memory by a pull at his note-book. 'He found that Clarence, on leaving England, had enlisted in the Third Chasseurs at Toulon, under the assumed name of—what was it? let me see. Ah, yes! Joseph Leboutillier; that he had been sent over to Algeria to join his regiment; that he took part for some time in operations in the interior; and that during the partial insurrection of 1868 he was employed in a column sent to reduce the mountaineers of some outlandish place they call Grande Kabylie. A certain battle took place in this remote quarter against the insurgents

on the 20th of June in that year, and after it, Mr. Joseph Leboutillier was reported missing. His name was struck off the roll of the regiment, and though his body happened to be never identified, the French authorities were perfectly convinced that he died in the skirmish, and was lost on the field—an accident which, as Beau Brummel said about a rent, may happen to any gentleman any day. Our own Courts admitted the papers Sir Arthur produced as proof of death, and were satisfied of the identity of Joseph Leboutillier with Clarence Knyvett. In short, the question's really as good as settled; a judge *in camera* has decided *pro forma* that Clarence Knyvett died on the 20th of June, 1868; so die he did, then, legally and officially, and there's nothing more to be said about it.'

Iris smiled.

'I wish, uncle dear,' she said good-humouredly, 'I could share your supreme faith in the absolute wisdom and abstract

justice of the law of England. But John Stuart Mill says—— Oh dear me! I forgot'—for Uncle Tom was stopping up his ears already, lest they should be profaned by fresh assaults of that dangerous and detestable political economy. 'To return to the question now before the House: what did Harold mean? or did he mean anything, by saying that many soldiers of Uncle Clarence's regiment didn't believe he was really dead, but thought he'd sneaked off and hidden himself somewhere among the natives?'

Uncle Tom started.

'God bless my soul!' he exclaimed, with a gesture of horror. 'So this is what comes, then, of sending girls to Cambridge. Who says women have no legal instincts? Why, the girl ought to have gone to the Old Bailey Bar! With the acumen of a judge—if judges have any, which I very much doubt—she puts her finger plump down at once on the one weak

point of the entire contention. Remarkable; re-markable! Well, the fact's this: an ancient French military in retreat—that's just how he signed himself—anonymous, practically—once wrote a letter to Sir Arthur at Sidi Aia (shortly after your uncle Alexander's decease), telling him he didn't believe this man Leboutillier was dead at all; but that he'd run away, and gone off absurdly on his own account to join the natives. The ancient French military in retreat didn't give his name, of course, so we couldn't cross-examine him; but your uncle sent me a copy of the letter from Aix-les-Bains, and also another to your cousin Harold. The ancient French soldier, in this precious communication, declared he had been a chasseur with Mr. Joseph Leboutillier, and had known him well; that Joseph Leboutillier was an eccentric person, holding exaggerated notions about justice to the *indigènes;* that he specially objected to this particular war, waged

against some people called Kabyles, if I recollect aright, who inhabit the trackless mountains of the interior; that he often expressed the deepest regret at being employed to crush out the liberty and independence of "these unfortunate people;" and that he almost refused on one occasion to obey his superior officer, when that gentleman ordered him to join in burning down the huts and villages of the insurgent tribesmen.'

'Very like a Knyvett,' Iris murmured parenthetically.

'Very. The Knyvetts were always quixotic,' Uncle Tom continued, with a faintly-compassionate inflexion of his forensic voice. 'But, at any rate, the ancient French military in retreat was firmly convinced that Joseph Leboutillier had deserted in the battle, to avoid bearing arms against the Kabyles any longer; and he said that many other ancient militaries of the same regiment entirely agreed with him in this supposition.'

'And then?'

'Why, then Sir Arthur sent up a French detective, who understood Arabic, into the mountains to make full inquiries, just to satisfy his conscience; for though he was a selfish, pig-headed old man, Sir Arthur, and as cross as two sticks, he, too, had a conscience, like all the Knyvetts—bar that singular exception, your uncle Charles, with his son Harold. Your father and you, to be sure, inherited the family conscience in its most virulent form; but it was strongly-enough developed even in poor old Sir Arthur. That's why he left his fortune to you, my dear, instead of to Harold; he thought it was his duty, and duty to a Knyvett's a perfect will-o'-the-wisp, leading you all into every Utopian quagmire you happen to come across—though, in this case, of course, he was perfectly right in obeying its dictates.'

'And what did Sir Arthur find out at last?' Iris asked gently, stroking her uncle's

hand with her own, as if to deprecate his wrath at her possession of anything so inconvenient as a sense of right towards others.

'Most fortunately, my child, he found out exactly nothing. The natives fought shy of his detective to a man, and energetically disclaimed knowledge of any sort about Joseph Leboutillier. They'd never even heard the name, they swore. So Sir Arthur came back empty-handed from his quest, and enjoyed his property in peace and quietness. Quite right, too. People ought never to pay any attention at all to anonymous letters. Particularly not in matters affecting the Probate and Divorce Division.'

Iris was silent for a minute or two more. Then she said slowly, much terrified lest she should rouse the dormant lion of Uncle Tom's wrath:

'Sir Arthur may have been satisfied with that, Uncle Tom, but I'm not. I suppose,

as you say, I've got the family conscience in an aggravated form; but, whatever it says, I must obey it. I must find out exactly what became of Uncle Clarence.'

The distinguished Q.C. flared up like petroleum.

'You're a fool if you do, my dear,' he answered, losing his temper.

'"But, children, you should never let your angry passions rise,"' Iris quoted gently. 'That shows you think there's still some chance Uncle Clarence is really alive, or has children living. In Jevons's "Inductive Logic," I remember'—but Uncle Tom's ears, stopped tight with either thumb, turned once more as deaf as the adder's. He listened not to Iris's Girtonian charms, charmed she never so learnedly, that stony-hearted barrister.

'I might be using somebody else's money, you see,' his niece went on quietly, as soon as Uncle Tom gave signs of having recovered the free use of his auditory nerve,

'and that, you must admit, would be sheer robbery.'

Uncle Tom had too much respect for the law of England not to allow, with obvious regret, the justice of that last patent truism.

'Well, what do you propose to do?' he responded sulkily.

'For the present, advertise in the English, French, and Algerian papers,' Iris answered, with calm persistence, 'for any information as to the whereabouts or death of Clarence Knyvett or Joseph Leboutillier.'

'And raise up for yourself a score or so of imitation Tichborne Claimants,' Uncle Tom cried, with concentrated scorn in his voice.

'What *is* a Tichborne Claimant?' Iris asked, in all innocence, imagining the animal to be some peculiar species of legal technicality—a *nolle prosequi*, for example, or an *oyer and terminer*. The shadowy forms of John Doe and Richard Roe

floated lambent on the air before her vague mental vision.

'Bless the child!' Uncle Tom exclaimed fervently, raising his hands to heaven. 'What happy innocence! What golden ignorance! You may thank your stars you don't even know the creature by name. Why, when I was young, my dear, some twenty years ago or so, we all of us wasted three good twelvemonths of our lives with feverish anxiety in following the fortunes and final exposure of a wretched impostor, a claimant to the Tichborne estates in Hampshire, who was inflicted upon a long-suffering world solely as the result of injudicious advertising in colonial papers by an ill-advised woman. And you're young enough and lucky enough never even to have heard of him! If you weren't, he'd have taught you a severe lesson. Well, so much for the present, you say—so far, bad; and how about the future?'

'In the second place,' Iris went on firmly,

'as soon as ever the weather's cool enough to allow it, I'll go over to Algeria, and hunt up all I can find out about Uncle Clarence on the spot, in person.'

'Well, that's not so bad,' the eminent Q.C. responded, mollified, 'for it'll enable you, at any rate, to take possession yourself of the house and belongings at Sidi Aia.'

CHAPTER XIV.

FOLLOWING UP THE CLUE.

It was evening, and Le Marchant lay outside the tent, in the shade of the old gnarled olive-tree that overhung the tomb, taking his lessons in Kabyle on an outstretched rug from his pretty teacher, Meriem. He had made considerable progress in the language by this time, having a natural taste for picking up strange tongues, as often happens with people of bilingual origin, and Le Marchant, as a Jersey man, had been born bilingual, if the expression may pass muster in this age of heredities. The painter, like Pliable, had turned back disheartened at that first Slough of Despond, the irregular verbs, and given

up the vain attempt in despair; he sat idly by now, drawing lazy sketches in his pocket-book of Meriem in her didactic attitude, with her forefinger uplifted, and her pupil before her. Hard by, two young Kabyles, just returned from their fields, stood gossiping opposite them, with hoes in their hands. One was Ahmed, Meriem's future purchaser; the other was a taller and better-robed young man of more unpleasing aspect, whom they had often seen before hanging about the village.

Suddenly, as Meriem was in the very act of saying, 'Now, Eustace, remember, *asfifi* —a dress,' and Le Marchant was obediently repeating the word after her in due form, one of the young men, for no apparent reason, raised his voice loudly, and, rushing forward with a yell, flew like a dog in blind rage and wrath at the throat of the other. Before they could clearly see what was happening, the second flung him off, but with some little difficulty. In a moment,

the tussle had assumed a savage form; they were fighting tooth and nail in one confused mass, and Ahmed's knife, drawn like lightning from its scabbard, gleamed bright in the air, just ready to descend on the bare breast of his taller antagonist. With a sharp cry Meriem and Le Marchant sprang forward together with one accord, and separated the two combatants by main force, after a short, sharp struggle. The whole thing was over in a second or two at most, and the two angry men stood glaring at one another across five yards of distance, like bull-dogs whose masters hold them apart forcibly by the collar. A few angry words, a few hasty explanations, a deprecating speech from poor trembling Meriem, whose face was scarlet with shame or excitement, and forthwith Ahmed's knife was quietly sheathed once more, and the men, smiling now with all their even white teeth in perfect good-humour, embraced like brothers, as if nothing at all had happened

between them. That is the way with these simple children of Nature. One moment they'll stick a knife into you without the slightest compunction; the next, for no reason a European can fathom, they'll give up their very hearts to please you.

'What was it all about?' Blake asked, with interest, as Meriem returned, flushed and panting, to the rug.

'It was about *me*, Vernon,' Meriem answered, unabashed, with perfect simplicity. 'This is how it happened. Ahmed wanted to marry me, you know, and had bargained with my uncle, and got a price named for me; but now, the other man, Hussein, has offered my uncle a little more, and so the Amine has made a new arrangement, and I'm to be sold to Hussein, who's offered the best price, and is so much the richer.'

She said it as she would have said the day was fine. It was matter of course to her that she should be thus passively and unresistingly disposed of.

'Do you like him?' Blake asked. 'Or, at least, do you dislike him any less than Ahmed?'

Meriem raised her stately head with proud unconcern.

'What does it matter to me?' she answered haughtily. 'I like none of them either better or worse than another. They're only Kabyles.'

'You don't care for Kabyles, then?' Blake went on, with culpable carelessness.

'Not since I've seen Englishmen,' Meriem replied, with the same perfectly pellucid sincerity as ever.

It was to her a simple statement of mental experience. She had no idea of flirting, in the English sense. Her feelings were so. She must marry, naturally, whoever purchased her.

When she was gone away that evening, and they sat alone in the tent, Le Marchant turned round after a long pause,

and said earnestly to Blake, 'It comes home to me more and more every day I stop here that we ought to hunt up something about this poor girl's English relations.'

'Why so!' the painter answered. 'You think she oughtn't to be allowed to marry Ahmed or Hussein?'

'Certainly not. It's terrible to me even to contemplate such a thing as possible. She must never marry anybody but a European, her natural equal.'

'Then why don't you marry her yourself, my dear fellow? You seem to be awfully gone on her, always.'

Le Marchant hesitated. 'Because,' he said, at last, in a very serious tone, 'she wouldn't take me.'

'Not take you! Just you ask her! What an absurd idea! Why, my dear fellow, she'd take Ahmed or Hussein, or any other man her uncle chose for her. Not take you, indeed! Not take an

Englishman! Why, she'd just jump at you.'

'I think not,' Le Marchant answered, much more earnestly. 'She might take Ahmed or Hussein, as you say, no doubt, because she couldn't help herself; but not me—of that I'm certain.'

'And why not, Le Marchant?'

'Because, my dear fellow, if you ask me the plain truth, her heart's already otherwise engaged—and to a man who doesn't really care twopence about her.'

There was a long pause; then Blake remarked again, withdrawing his cigarette in a pensive way, 'Do you really mean to tell me, Le Marchant, you'd marry that girl—that barbarian—that savage, if you thought she'd take you?'

'It's a terrible thing to think of her being made over, bound hand and foot, to Ahmed or Hussein,' the naturalist answered evasively. 'They'd treat her no better than they treat their donkeys.'

'And to prevent that, you'd throw yourself away upon her, a mere Kabyle girl! You, with all your cleverness and knowledge and education! A man like you, the heir of all the ages, in the foremost files of time — why, the thing's ridiculous! Le Marchant, I haven't half your brains or your learning, I know; I'm nothing but a landscape painter, the least among the wielders of camel's hair, but sooner than tie myself for life to such a creature as that, I'd blow my brains out, such as they are, and be done with it for ever. To toy with, to flirt with, to amuse one for a day—very well, if you will; but to marry—impossible. Never, never, never!'

'Tastes differ,' Le Marchant answered drily; 'especially in these matters. Some people insist upon accomplishments and high-heeled boots; others care rather for marked character and native energy. You may judge men largely by what they admire. Strong natures like strong natures; and,

given strength, they despise externals. Other minds think more of mere culture, perhaps; it's not the diamond they admire, but its cutting. Diamonds in the rough are to them mere pebbles. For my part, it's the stone itself that takes my fancy. You don't care for her; I don't ask you to care for her; but don't break her heart any more than's absolutely necessary. For I see she can't help falling in love with you.'

Next morning, when Meriem came round to the tent, as was her daily wont, with the milk from the cows she tended herself for the two young Englishmen, Le Marchant met her with a sadder and more anxious face than usual. 'Meriem,' he said, 'I want to speak to you seriously about your own future. Whatever comes, you must never marry either Ahmed or Hussein.'

'Does Vernon say not?' Meriem asked, all fluttering.

'No,' Le Marchant answered, crushing

down her poor heart at once of deliberate purpose, for he knew no possible good would come to her of that painful illusion. 'I say so myself, because I take a friendly interest—a very friendly interest—in your life and happiness. Meriem, I want to look up your English friends. If I found them out, would you care to go and live in England?'

'Not alone,' Meriem answered, with a promptitude which clearly showed she had already asked herself that leading question. 'When Yusuf used to take me on his knee, and tell me about England long ago, I always thought I should like to go there, if only he could go with me. And since I've seen you and Vernon, Eustace, and heard all about it, I've often fancied I should like to go there if only—if only I had anyone to take care of me and take me there. But it's so far across the sea, and the people over yonder are all infidels—not that I'm quite so afraid of infidels now, either, since I've seen so much more of you and Vernon.'

'Why wouldn't your father take you there, Meriem?'

Meriem opened her large brown eyes very wide with astonishment.

'They would have put him in prison, of course,' she said, with decision. 'It was for fear of that that he ran away and became a Kabyle. None of the infidels seemed to like him. The French would have shot him, and the English would have imprisoned him. I think there must have been feuds between the tribes in England, and that his tribe must have been angry with him, and cast him off, for he told me his family would have nothing to say to him. But I like the English very much for those three things: that Yusuf was English, and that the English were kinder to my father than the French, and that—that you and Vernon are Englishmen, Eustace.'

Le Marchant looked at her with profound pity. He couldn't bear to think this strong

and guileless nature should be cast away as a beast of burden for some wretched Kabyle like Ahmed or Hassein.

'Is there nobody, Meriem,' he said at last, 'who can tell me anything more about your father?'

Meriem reflected for a moment in silence. Then she answered somewhat doubtfully: 'If anybody could tell you, it's the Père Baba.'

'And who's the Père Baba?' Le Marchant went on eagerly.

'He's a priest, a Christian, a missionary they call him, down at St. Cloud, in the valley there. St. Cloud, you know, is where the colonists are. It's a wicked place, all full of Frenchmen. Yusuf would never go down to the village, for fear the people who live there should learn his French name, and then they'd have shot him. But the Père Baba and the Père Paternoster used sometimes to come up to see Yusuf, and my father was fond of

the Père Paternoster, and told him many things. Our people were angry at this often, and used to say to him: "Yusuf, you're a Christian still at heart, and you confess to the priest and say prayers with him;" but Yusuf always answered: "No, not so bad as that; I only see the Père Paternoster as a friend, and on matters of business." And once, before the Père Paternoster was dead, my father fastened this charm round my neck, and told me the Père Paternoster had given it to him, and to be very careful that I never lost it.'

'What's in it? May I see?' Le Marchant went on, laying hold of it eagerly. But Meriem drew back and started almost as if she'd been shot.

'Oh no,' she cried; 'not that, not that! Anything but that! Why, I wouldn't let even Vernon open it.'

'And what makes you like Vernon so much better than me?' Le Marchant asked, half hurt by her innocent frankness.

Meriem made no attempt to parry the charge. 'Who knows?' she answered, with both graceful arms and hands spread open before her. 'Who can tell what makes one's heart go so? Who can give any reason for all these things? . . . He paints, and he talks, and he's beautiful, and I like him. . . . I like you, too, Eustace; oh, ever so much; I never liked anybody else so much before, except Yusuf; but I like Vernon differently; quite, quite differently. . . . You know how I mean. You must have felt it yourself. . . . But I can't stop now. I must go on with my milk. The other people in the village will be waiting for their *cous-cous*. Don't be angry, like the Kabyles, because I like Vernon best. This evening again we shall learn Kabyle together.'

CHAPTER XV.

AN OASIS OF CIVILIZATION.

'VERNON,' Le Marchant called out with a sudden resolve, 'I'm off to St. Cloud. I've a reason for going to-day. Will you come along with me?'

'All right, Eustace, if you'll just wait till I've finished washing out my sky,' the painter answered briskly. They had picked up the trick of calling one another by their Christian names from Meriem's example, and it had now grown with them almost habitual.

Hitherto, the two new-comers had intentionally avoided the dissipations of St. Cloud, not being anxious to study life in its peculiar outlying Algerian development,

among the remote corners where a few ardent pioneers of civilization diffuse the blessings of European culture over a benighted land by congregating together to drink bad absinthe under the eye of the sun before the bare mud platform of a fourth-rate *estaminet*. But now that the chance of finding out something definite about Meriem's parentage drew Le Marchant on, he was ready to face even the wooden houses and malodorous streets of the dirty new village in search of trustworthy news as to their strange acquaintance.

It was a long weary tramp, over hill and dale, among wooded ravines, and across rocky ledges ; but before twelve o'clock the two young men had reached the military track from Fort National to St. Cloud, and found themselves at once, to their great surprise, in a fine and splendidly-engineered French highway. They had scarcely struck upon it, however, when, to their still greater

astonishment and no little amusement, they came full face upon a mincing little French-woman, attired after the very latest Paris fashion, in a frivolous frock, a jaunty jacket, and a volatile hat of wondrous architecture. She was thirty-five and skittish, with high-heeled boots and an attenuated waist, utterly unadapted to the practical necessities of a bare and dusty Algerian highroad. On either side of her, with clanking spurs, paced a military gentleman of youthful years but portly dimensions; while madame, in the midst, with her graceful parasol held coquettishly, now on this side, now on that, chatted affably to both in intermittent gurgles with alternate flows of most Parisian liveliness.

'*C'est Madame l'Administratrice,*' the dirty-robed Kabyle, who had come with them to show them the way, murmured softly in their ears, with a low bend of his body, as the lady approached them. He had lived at St. Cloud, and knew

some words of French. Le Marchant and Blake raised their hats as the lady passed, after the French fashion in country places, and would have gone on without stopping, half abashed at their dusty and way-worn condition, had not madame brought them to with a lively broadside across their bows, so to speak, of '*Bonjour, messieurs.*'

'*Bonjour*, madame,' Le Marchant answered, saluting again, and still anxious to pass on; but still the lady stopped him.

'You are the English artists, messieurs, of whom our *indigènes* told us, who have pitched a camp on the hills of the Beni-Merzoug, *n'est-ce pas?*' she asked condescendingly.

'My friend is a painter,' Le Marchant answered with a wave of his hand towards his blushing companion; 'I myself am a naturalist; and we are certainly camping out—but with one tent only, madame—at the Beni-Merzoug village.'

The lady pouted, or, rather, which is quite

another thing, *elle faisait la moue*, an accomplishment as indescribable as unknown in English. 'Can you be unaware, messieurs,' she said with a smile of mingled reproach and gentle forgiveness, 'that it is the custom in the colony for all new-comers in the *arrondissement* of St. Cloud to pay their respects the first to M. l'Administrateur and to myself at the Fort? We have long been expecting you to do us the honour of making us a formal visit. *D'ailleurs*, we are not so well off for *agréments* in these trackless wilds'—she gazed straight ahead along the bare and well-made French road before her with a vacant air—'that we can afford to lose the agreeable society of an English painter and an English *savant*.' She looked up and smiled. 'I adore art, and I reverence science—at a distance.'

'Not trackless, quite, madame, however wild,' one of her escort murmured with gentle reproof, looking in front, in his turn, at the magnificent gradients of the sloping

road, with paternal pride. He was an officer of the *Génie*, and he felt his department unduly depreciated by madame's reflection.

'Forgive us, madame,' Le Marchant answered, somewhat abashed by this open attack upon his character for politeness. 'We are strangers in the land, and to say the truth, we scarcely expected at St. Cloud the charm of female society. Besides, you do us far too much honour. We are simple students, each in his own art, and we have scarcely brought with us in our rough-and-ready camp the necessary costume for appearing in fitting dress at European functions. We could hardly venture to present ourselves thus before you.'

As for Blake, all awe-struck at the high-heeled boots and the Parisian hat, he left the conversation entirely in the competent hands of the naturalist. His French, such as it was, forsook him forthwith. Indeed, the commonplaces of the Ollendorffian dialect

would here have stood him in very poor stead. He felt he could not insult so grand a lady as Madame l'Administratrice by addressing to her casual and fortuitous remarks about *la femme du jardinier* or *le fils du menuisier*.

Madame bowed a condescending little bow.

'In consideration of your contrition,' she said, 'and your implied promise of future amendment, monsieur, absolution is granted you. You see my generosity. You were coming to visit us, of course? Well, then, M. le Lieutenant,' to the elder of her companions, 'we will turn round and accompany these gentlemen back to the Fort.'

Le Marchant hesitated. He didn't wish to be rude, but it went against the grain of his honest nature to pretend a call was meant where none had been intended. A happy thought struck him, by way of a compromise.

'Not in this *tenue*, madame,' he said.

'Even in Algeria, we must respect the *convenances;* we couldn't think of calling upon any lady in such a costume. *En effet*, we were going to visit the Père Baba.'

The lady sighed.

'Hélas,' she answered, 'this is not Paris. We are glad to get callers in any *tenue.* But you will at least permit us to accompany you on your way as far as the village?'

'Thank you, madame. 'You are very good. This is a charming situation. So wild, so picturesque——'

'And so wholly unendurable!'

'But surely, madame, the scenery is lovely. It's a beautiful country.'

'Beautiful! *Je vous l'accorde: mais vu de loin.* For a painter, possibly; but for a woman, *mon Dieu!* it's too far from Paris.'

'Still,' Blake ventured to remark, inspired to a sudden Ollendorffian outburst in defence of the scenery, 'there are many worse places than this in the world.'

'Perhaps so,' the little woman replied,

with a crushing smile, 'but *faute de pire*, I'm quite satisfied in that way with this one.'

Blake retired in disorder from the unequal contest. Even had he possessed the rudiments of her language, the little Frenchwoman was clearly too much for him at the game of repartee. But Le Marchant, a bolder spirit, tried once more.

'You have lived here long, madame?' he asked, with his perfect accent.

'Long enough almost to have forgotten the boulevards. Fifteen years, monsieur; figure that to yourself; *et je regrette encore la cuisine Parisienne.*' She spoke with pathos.

'That is indeed constancy!' Le Marchant replied, with appropriate emotion.

'Monsieur,' the lady retorted, with a little mock curtsey and an ironical smile, 'it is *your* sex, remember, that has the monopoly of fickleness.'

They walked on towards the village, along

the dusty road, all five abreast, Madame l'Administratrice chatting away gaily all the time in the same flighty strain about the discomforts of her situation, the distance from a really good milliner, the difficulty of getting endurable coffee, and, above all, the vices and shortcomings of *ces cochons d'indigènes*. Upon this last pet subject—a colonial substitute for the great servant question — madame, after the wont of Algerian ladies, waxed very warm, and nodded the volatile little hat most impressively, till the stability of its feathers was almost compromised.

'Believe me, monsieur,' she said at last, with much energy, stamping her neat small foot on the dusty *trottoir*, 'we shall never have peace and security in Algeria till the French soldiers join hands across the country in a long line, and, walking over hill and dale together, sweep the *indigènes* before them into the Mediterranean.'

'*C'est vrai*,' the officer of the *Génie*

assented with a profoundly convinced nod.

'Strong measures, indeed,' Le Marchant answered, laughing.

'It is thus, monsieur, that France must fulfil her civilizing mission,' the lady repeated stoutly. 'Join hands in line, and march across the country, and sweep every Arab into the Mediterranean. *Le bon Dieu* never made the world, you may be sure, for those pigs of Arabs.'

'But the Kabyles?' Blake asked, with another gasping effort.

'Do I distinguish between them, monsieur?' madame answered scornfully, turning upon him with a suddenness that fairly frightened the painter. 'Every *cochon d'indigène* is an Arab for me. I make no fine discriminations between Arab and Arab. *Un indigène c'est un indigène. Que voulez-vous, monsieur?*'

At the entrance of the little colony, madame paused and pointed.

'Down that road, messieurs,' she said, with her bland, small smile, 'in the large house to the left, you will find the Père Baba. *Du reste*, I am charmed to have made your acquaintance so happily. It is pleasant to hear our beautiful language so well spoken. We shall meet again. *Au revoir*, *messieurs*. I receive, recollect, on Wednesdays and Saturdays. You can no longer plead ignorance. We shall expect to see you at my next reception.'

And with a coquettish inclination of the volatile hat, and a curious side wriggle of the frivolous frock, the spoiled child of the boulevards, accompanied by her military bowing escort, disappeared down the one long white street of the timber-built village.

Le Marchant and Blake, left alone by themselves, looked at one another in silence, and smiled a broad smile at this unexpected apparition among the wilds of Africa.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WHITE FATHERS.

'You are the Père Baba, monsieur?' Le Marchant asked, with some misgiving in his tone, of the white-frocked old gentleman in a plain Arab burnouse who opened the door of the mission to receive them.

'My name in religion is Brother Geronimo, my son,' the old priest answered, with a courteous bow; 'but the *indigènes* among whom I labour—to little avail, I fear, for the Propagation of the Faith is slow in Africa—know me better as the Père Baba. Will you step inside and refresh yourselves awhile? We are glad to receive you.'

In the bare white *salon*, with its little bright-coloured religious chromo-litho-

graphs, into which he ushered them, Le Marchant briefly explained to the good father the object of their visit, and asked with many apologies for such information as the priest could give him with regard to a person who seemed to be equally well known either as Yusuf, a Kabyle, or as Joseph Leboutillier.

The gray-bearded father sighed and tapped his forehead. 'Ah, *le nommé Yusuf*,' he said, with a compassionate face. 'Yes, yes, I knew him ; I knew him, of course, *ce pauvre misérable d'Yusuf*. But you come too late ; my brother Antoine was the man to have asked—him whom the *indigènes* called the Père Paternoster. Unhappily, Brother Antoine died last year, and much of what Yusuf had told him died with him, being given, of course, under the seal of religion. For Yusuf, though he lived among the Kabyles as a Kabyle, and bowed the knee, *pour ainsi dire*, in the temple of Rimmon, to save his life, remained at heart

a Christian to the end, and confided many things to my poor brother, the Père Paternoster. He had a good heart, our brother Antoine, and he was kind to Yusuf, and went often to see him in his lonely hut on the mountains of the Beni-Merzoug.'

'But tell us at least as much as you know, *mon père*,' Le Marchant insisted, 'whatever was not said to you or your brother under the seal of religion.'

'You come as friends?' the father asked suspiciously, 'or for some ulterior object?'

Le Marchant explained in a very few words, with transparent frankness, that they came in the interest of Yusuf's daughter. They knew she had English blood in her veins, and they wished, if possible, to restore her to her relations, and to the bosom of Christendom.

That last touch told with Père Baba visibly. 'It's a sad story, *mon fils*,' he went on, closing his eyes, and turning his face towards the bare white ceiling, as he stroked the

beard which all missionary priests are permitted to wear in virtue of their calling ; ' a sad story, and I'm afraid I hardly know enough about it to tell you accurately anything that will be of serious use to this girl Meriem. She calls herself Meriem, I believe ; ah yes, I thought so. I recollect the circumstances. Well, Yusuf's story, so far as I can recall what Père Antoine told me, was something like this. He was an Englishman by birth, though I forget his name—let us agree that your guttural English names are impossible to remember. He came of a family, a very good family ; but he was spendthrift and foolish, though never, I believe, wicked—*jamais, jamais coupable.* He told me so, and I always believed him. *Eh bien,* according to his own account, which you must remember is the only one I have heard, his younger brother, sharing his embarrassments, forged their father's name to certain acceptances, which *ce pauvre* Yusuf, in a weak moment, not knowing

their nature, agreed to get cashed for him. Yusuf declared to his dying day he had never the slightest idea that they were forged, and that his brother deceived him. For that, I know nothing ; but, monsieur' —and the old priest's voice had a womanly note of compassion as he spoke—' I verily believe he was truthful, this unhappy exile.'

' To judge by his daughter, I believe he must have been,' Le Marchant interposed, with perfect sincerity.

The Father nodded.

' Well, the fraud came to light,' he continued, ' and the brother shuffled out of it; he was *un mauvais sujet*, this brother, Yusuf always assured us. The evidence all pointed to Yusuf alone; the law was in search of him; Yusuf lost courage, and fled the country. He took passage to America as a mere blind, but, as a matter of fact, he fled to France, under an assumed name, and never again dared to communicate with his relations.'

'He might have done so at least before he died,' Le Marchant cried warmly. 'The danger would then have been all past. For his daughter's sake, he ought surely, on his dying bed, to have written.'

'Monsieur,' the Father answered, with his eyes still closed, recalling slowly the half-forgotten facts, 'he never lay upon his dying bed at all. Had he died thus, these things might all have turned out differently. But *le bon Dieu* willed it otherwise. You shall hear in due time; for this was what happened. *Ce pauvre* Yusuf enlisted in the Third Chasseurs at Toulon, and was sent across here, under the assumed name of Joseph Leboutillier, to put down the insurrection among the M'zabites and the Kabyles. But as soon as he saw the sort of warfare in which he was to be engaged, his heart smote him; for he was a just man, Yusuf, though he had many failings; and let us admit, monsieur, that we other French have not always made war very

honourably or very justifiably against these poor *indigènes*.'

'I fear as much from their disposition towards you,' Le Marchant said shortly.

'Well, when Yusuf came up to Grande Kabylie, *en effet*, he found his work was to be nothing less than exterminating the natives and expropriating their territory. That was what Yusuf, with his high ideas, could never endure. He hated to be made an instrument of what seemed to him tyranny. So, in a skirmish one day with the Beni-Yenni people, he found himself, by chance, alone behind a cactus hedge, with the body of a dead Kabyle in the ditch beside him. This he told Brother Antoine,' the old man said, looking round with a dubious air, 'and I don't know whether I ought to repeat it, for I am not sure that he didn't tell it under the seal of religion.'

'Continue,' Le Marchant said, with evident earnestness. 'It is for no bad purpose

that we ask you to confide in us. What you say only interests me more profoundly than ever in this poor girl, Meriem.'

'So he took the dead Kabyle's burnouse,' the priest went on, seizing his hearer's arm for further emphasis, 'and stole away slowly, all unperceived, into the Kabyle camp as an honest deserter. He made signs to the *indigènes* that he had come as a friend. One of them, a former Spahis, who had served in France, and understood our language, interpreted for him; and the Kabyles, glad to avail themselves of his superior skill and military knowledge, received him with open arms and made him as one of them. It was thus he came to find himself proscribed by two nations at once—by the English as a forger, and by the French as a deserter.'

'It's a touching story!' Le Marchant cried, with emotion.

'Touching, indeed, for the poor man himself,' the Father went on, 'for, hunted

down and terrified for his life as he was, Yusuf dared not return to civilization on any side; he had no money even to go to Italy or America, where, perhaps, he might have been free; and, a gentleman born and bred as he was, he became as a Kabyle, earning his bread by gathering olives or cutting corn with his own hands, and seeing no Christian face anywhere save my own and the Père Paternoster's, who alone had the keeping of his terrible secrets. The Amine of the Beni-Merzoug gave him his sister Halima, this Meriem's mother, as a Kabyle wife; and that one girl was their only child.'

'They were married?' Le Marchant asked.

'After the Kabyle fashion, yes. So far as I know, there was no other rite. But Yusuf lived with her faithfully as a husband, and loved her truly—in this, as in all things, accepting to the full his altered situation. He was a lovable soul, and in

spite of everything, one couldn't help loving him ; there was a silent heroism about the man's endurance that extorted at last one's highest admiration.'

'And what became of him at last ?' Le Marchant asked, as the Father paused.

'He died suddenly,' Père Baba answered, 'without being able to give Père Paternoster his dying directions, or perhaps I might be able to tell you something more about his family in England. His death was brought about by most unhappy circumstances. A few years since, a French detective came up into the mountains, and began to make inquiries about Joseph Leboutillier. The Kabyles heard of it, and warned Yusuf; they felt sure the authorities had somehow learned a deserter in open war on active service was skulking among their mountains, and had determined to make a stern example of him. So poor Yusuf fled to a cave on the Djurjura.'

'Just below the summit of Lalla Khadidja ?' Le Marchant asked eagerly.

The Father nodded.

'You know it, then ?' he said. 'Yes, it was there, the place. He remained in that cave in hiding for more than a week, while the French detective, an inquisitive fellow, went everywhere about, peering and prying, and asking for news of him, under the pretence that he wanted it for a friendly purpose. But the Kabyles were too cunning to be taken in like that; they denied having ever heard of any such deserter. So in the end the detective went back again to Algiers empty-handed, and poor Yusuf, who had been supplied with food meanwhile by the Kabyles, ventured to come down again one dark night to visit his dead wife's village.'

'And then ?' Le Marchant inquired.

'Why, then, the weather being very stormy, and the rocks wet, the poor fellow, weak with exposure, slipped and fell on a precipice of the Djurjura, and was taken up

stone-dead by his friends, and buried in the cemetery on the side of the mountain. So that was how he never came to give final directions about his daughter to anybody; and as Père Paternoster knew all these particulars under the seal of religion, he could not divulge them or claim the girl for a Christian, as he would have wished to do; so she has been brought up ever since by the Amine, her uncle.'

The simple story touched Le Marchant profoundly. There was something so pathetic in this roughly-drawn picture of that double outcast flying from the offended laws of two great countries, one after the other, and taking refuge at last in a miserable rock-shelter on the summit of a wild and snow-clad mountain, that his imagination was deeply stirred by the plaintive incidents. He tried to find out more from the old priest by questioning; but he soon discovered that the substance of his tale had all been told, and that the Father had

little more than comment and conjecture to add to this, his first hasty summary. Père Paternoster could have told more, he was sure; but Père Paternoster was dead and buried, and nobody else knew much, if anything, about the whole matter.

They would have risen to leave when the interview was finished, but the Father, with old-fashioned religious hospitality, begged them to stop and share his *déjeûner*.

'It is not much,' he said, with an apologetic shrug and a depreciatory gesture of his open palms—'an omelette—for it's Friday—and a morsel of dried fish, washed down with a little blue wine of the country; but such as it is, messieurs, I trust you will do me the honour to partake of it.'

'We shall be only too charmed, *mon père*,' Le Marchant replied truthfully. 'We haven't sat down at a civilized table, or eaten bread, or tasted wine, since we came to Kabylie. It will be a welcome relief to us from that eternal *cous-cous*.'

In five minutes the breakfast duly appeared on the table—an omelette which might have made even Madame l'Administratrice herself less poignantly regret the Parisian cuisine, some *croquettes* of dry cod, most daintily flavoured, and a bottle of good red wine from the White Fathers' own rich vineyards at the Maison Carrée—to all which the two young Englishmen, long strangers to such luxury, and inured to Diego's rough-and-ready methods of out-door cookery, did ample justice. The bread, in particular, was highly commended—nice white little *petit pains* that would have done honour to the Viennese bakeries in Paris. Vernon Blake praised it so loudly, to the disparagement of *cous-cous*, that when they left the mission-house the good Father must needs press upon them the entire remainder of that day's batch to take back with them to the village.

'I'll roll the loaves up in paper,' he said, 'and your Kabyle can carry them. Let me

see; what have I got in the way of a newspaper? Ah, here's yesterday's *Dépêches Algériennes*.'

'Better still,' Le Marchant said, 'for to tell you the truth, though we get letters occasionally when the villagers are going down to market at Tizi-Ouzou, we haven't seen a newspaper of any sort for the last six weeks.'

So they returned to Beni-Merzoug with their bread and their paper, Le Marchant at least not a little saddened by the painful history of Meriem's father.

Meriem herself was waiting at the tent to meet them as they returned.

'I want you to see what I can do, Eustace,' she cried to Le Marchant, with almost childish delight. 'Vernon has lent me one of his books to try on, and I think now I can read English.'

Le Marchant took the book from her hand incredulously; it was a paper-covered edition of a popular novel. The girl

glanced over his shoulder, and, to his great surprise, spelt out several lines, one after the other, with tolerable correctness. She made a hash of the proper names, to be sure, and of the long words that did not yet enter into her now daily-widening English vocabulary; but as to words that she knew, she read them at sight with an ease and rapidity that fairly took Le Marchant's breath away.

'How on earth did you learn to do this, Meriem?' he cried, astonished. 'It's wonderful! wonderful!'

Meriem looked up at him with not unbecoming conscious pride.

'I was so ashamed of myself,' she said, 'that day when I couldn't read my father's English name in Vernon's picture, that I made up my mind I wouldn't wait another day or another minute without beginning to learn the letters of my father's language. So I borrowed one of Vernon's books, without telling you about it, and found a

girl of our people who could teach me the names of all the letters, because, you see, she'd been taught by the priests at the school of St. Cloud, and they're the same as the French ones, though they sound a little different. I could read Kabyle already, of course, in Arabic letters, that I learnt for the Koran, and I think when you know how to read one language it must always be easy to read any other one. Besides, I thought I should be ashamed not to know if ever—well, if ever I should happen to go to England.'

Le Marchant smiled a pitying smile, and answered nothing.

'Besides, the book itself is so interesting,' Meriem went on, in an ecstasy. 'It tells you about how people live in England. And now that I've read it, do you know, Eustace, I think I should like to live in England; the people seem all so peaceable and good there.'

'Why didn't you tell Vernon first?' Le

Marchant asked, with a sidelong glance at the beautiful girl.

Meriem hesitated.

'Because . . . I don't know why . . . I can't explain it . . . but somehow I was shy of telling Vernon.'

There was a long pause, during which neither of them said anything to one another. Then Le Marchant, raising his eyes unsteadily from the ground with a stifled sigh, said suddenly:

'Was your father a good man, Meriem?'

Meriem started. 'He was the very best man that ever lived,' she answered earnestly, with the full fervour of confirmed conviction.

'And yet,' Le Marchant mused, half to himself, 'the English wanted to imprison him for forgery, and the French would have liked to shoot him for desertion.'

'Perhaps that was because he was so very good,' Meriem answered simply. 'Don't you think, Eustace, good people are always

least understood and the most persecuted? Why, even the blessed Prophet himself had to fly from Mecca to avoid being killed by the wickedness of the people.'

Le Marchant could not resist an amused smile. The incongruity of the words on such English lips seemed so grotesque as to be almost ridiculous.

END OF VOL. I.

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